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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Embedding reciprocity in human resource management: A social exchange theory of the role of frontline managers

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Abstract

This article focuses on frontline managers (FLM) who, until recently, have been neglected as key actors in the implementation of human resource management policies and subsequent employee performance outcomes. This research finds that FLMs are not a homogenous entity who act as robotic conformists, but rather evolve and become important agents shaping organisational performance outcomes and worker effort. The article extends social exchange theory to present a 'zone of reciprocity' that refines understanding of the causal chain between different FLM styles, HR policy and employee performance outcomes of organisational citizenship behaviour and commitment. The data are survey responses from 613 employees who all work and report to specific FLM in a single medical device multi-divisional organisation. The article offers new theory development as well as implications for practitioners interested in FLM and the HR performance causal chain.

KEYWORDS
commitment, frontline managers, HRM and organisational performance, organisational citizenship behaviours, reciprocity, social exchange theory

Abbreviations: FLM, frontline managers; HR, human resources; HRM, human resource management; LMX, leader-member exchange; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; SET, social exchange theory.

Practitioner notes

What is currently known about the subject matter?

- The devolution of HR activities to frontline managers (FLM) is regarded as both a central theoretical tenant of strategic human resource management, and a probable link in the causal chain explanation.
- The extent to which different frontline management approaches contribute to and/or hinder the performance chain is less known.

What the paper adds to this?

- The research specifically tests for different frontline management behavioural styles and their links to specific employee performance outcomes.
- The data show three FLM behavioural styles ('policy-enactor', 'leadership' and 'coaching') positively affect employee performance measures of organisational citizenship behaviours, and commitment.

The implications of study findings for practitioners

- Organisational resources designed to improve performance could be invested by supporting frontline workers and frontline managers at work unit level to better enact HR policy.
- The 'zone of reciprocity' construct offers a framing for both practitioners and future researchers to model FLM role types to HR content and organisational contexts.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The phrase frontline worker has echoed through society in the past few years as industries grappled with the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic. On one hand, frontline workers became heroes attributed with keeping society running during periods of restricted movement (Hennekam et al., 2020). On the other hand, however, many frontline workers became victims of the pandemic either directly through Covid-19 exposure or indirectly through mental health, job furloughs, retrenchments, and uncertainty (Song et al., 2021). The longer-term consequences of this societal upheaval are still emerging, and future debates continue as to how workers will be managed both 'in-person' and 'remotely' in a post-pandemic world. Other concerns include the vulnerability of those exposed to global supply chains, restrictions on labour mobility, technology, and demands driving re-skilling (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

These and other future trends bring the role of frontline management at workplace level to the fore of public concern. The research in this article contributes to these debates, arguing in particular that any success in leveraging frontline management roles in the future of work agenda will depend crucially on the FLM-worker dynamic of agency, power, authority and (mutual) reciprocity to address challenges. Indeed, both human resource academics and practitioners are being charged with helping to re-shape a new future agenda for people management (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016). The human resource management (HRM) literature has grown in testing the potential relationship between policy and organisational performance (Cafferkey et al., 2020; Guest, 2017; Sanders & Yang, 2016), as well as beginning to look more specifically at the relationship between FLMs and employee performance outcomes (Fu et al., 2020; Guest et al., 2021; Shipton et al., 2016). However, the existing literature does not explain why or how different types or styles of FLMs influence actual practice enactment at work group level. This article advances a new a construct to navigate individual, work group and FLM variability, and demonstrates its empirical value in a frontline healthcare manufacturing setting. Guided by Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), we contribute new understanding to the dynamic nature of reciprocity in the HRM-Performance chain, with a focus on the FLM as a central actor. Conceptually, we advance reciprocity in a way that goes beyond previous individual level studies, such as those focussed exclusively on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) or Organisational Citizenship Behaviours (OCB)

(e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2000). We integrate multi-group level factors that influence content and context relationships at the work unit through frontline management approaches to enacting HR policy.

The article makes two primary contributions. First, a '*zone of reciprocity*' is presented to consider how and why different types or styles of FLMs affect the implementation of human resource policies at the point of production. We theorise that, when viewed as a zone rather than a single item, reciprocation can explain the role of FLM in the HR-performance link. Specifically, we show that reciprocation measures explain differences in employee outcomes both within and across multiple FLM types. FLMs are defined as 'those in the lower echelons of the management hierarchy with immediate responsibility for their subordinates' work and performance' (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007, p. 4). The second contribution, using different FLM behaviour types, builds granularity to causal chain knowledge about HRM and employee performance outcomes. Acknowledging the reality of different FLM approaches provides a further dimension of design to HR systems. Empirically, our research finds that three FLM behavioural types—those of 'policy enactor', 'leadership' and 'coaching'—all positively influence employee performance outcomes of OCB and employee commitment. The approach is used to build a '*zone of reciprocity*' as a new theoretical construct, thereby extending SET.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we discuss relevant research that assists the development of our conceptual framework. From the latter, a theoretical model of reciprocity is advanced and tested in a large-scale cross-sectional study. The article tests individual-level hypotheses (H1–H3) before aggregating differential FLM styles at a group (team) level (H4). Finally, we test the possible mediating influences (H5) between these levels. After presenting the results, we discuss the theoretical contributions of our research, specifically, the '*zone of reciprocity*' construct. Implications for practice are then discussed and possible suggestions for future research provided.

2 | FLMS, HRM AND A 'ZONE' OF RECIPROCITY

There is a growing body of evidence that HRM can help organisational performance (Combs et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2012). However, the causal link is contested, with a focus in much extant research describing the 'what' (e.g., that HR has a link to performance), rather than the 'how' or 'why' the ways people are management adds to performance (Guest, 2021, p. 177). One stream of research has considered how FLM implement HR policy and organisational strategy (Fu et al., 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2019; Pak & Kim, 2020; Townsend et al., 2022). However, employment relationships are fraught with tension and antagonisms and FLMs are unlikely to treat all employees in the same way (Edwards & Hodder, 2022). Further, the nature of reciprocity between individual workers and their immediate superior may not be consistent (Fu et al., 2020, p. 205). It is possible, therefore, the different ways in which FLMs approach HR implementation may vary by their own style or preference, by the nature of relations and tensions with the employees under their authority, or by the various ways in which intended HR policy is enacted at the shopfloor level. In short, FLMs are a key mediating agent in the causal chain between HR policy objectives and actual relationship practices enacted at a workplace.

An important consideration is that FLMs are a primary interpretive filter for employees that influence the employees' performance (Pak & Kim, 2020; Townsend et al., 2012). We suggest that the focus on 'what' practices FLMs implement neglects the possibility of different FLM role behaviours in deciding 'how' and 'why' to enact or bypass certain HR policy. The realities of the *how* FLMs go about enacting policy is not straightforward and involves consideration of an indeterminacy to the relationship between manager and employee (Dundon & Dobbins, 2015; Edwards et al., 2006). Such indeterminacy is about how much control managers demand, while at the same time how much effort employees reciprocate in return. To advance understanding, we evaluate the possibility of different FLM styles that signal variation in the nature and scope of reciprocity; that is, reciprocity is more than a static norm and may constitute a more fluid relational area in the interactions between employee and frontline manager (see Figure 1).

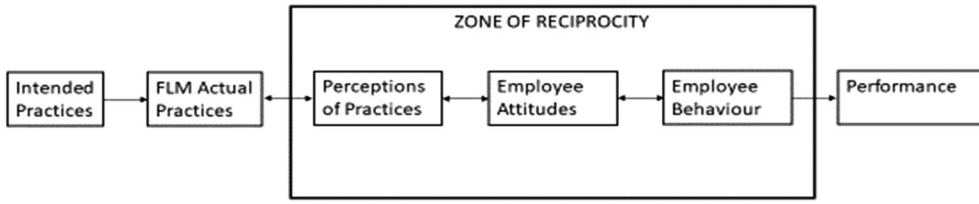

FIGURE 1 The people management-performance causal chain, with the Zone of Reciprocity added. FLM, frontline managers

A zone for reciprocity can connect perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. As a 'zone', it highlights that it is not one factor but rather the combination of various sources of influence affecting reciprocity in workplace. The zone has its origins in SET, where favourable treatment is expected to engender favourable reciprocity. Gouldner (1960) explains how human norms of aversion to being indebted to someone, and how reciprocation often seeks to overcompensate for indebtedness. In the employment context, that might translate to an employee going above and beyond their role to reciprocate perceived treatment from their manager. Gouldner's norm gave rise to a body of knowledge where exchange relationships are theorised based on the favourable–indebtedness hypothesis. A zone of reciprocity provides a construct to merge further distinct social exchange relations in a way that provides an explanatory value as to how and why FLMs impact employee outcomes. The zone contains the factors that an employee considers in the assessment of favourable treatment, and their subsequent response. The idea of an area or zone for reciprocity helps to see that assessments of favourability will be influenced by the employee's holistic experience of the FLM behaviour, as well as other content and context conditions (e.g., organisational support systems) in the employment relationship (Cooke, 2018). In other words, the zone theorises that for the same FLM action or treatment, responses will vary because of the interdependence of other contextual factors. In this way, the concept of a *zone* highlights that reciprocity is dynamic and fluid, showing variability across different FLM, even in the same organisation. It allows us to conceptualise a space or an area in which people might move over the course of a relationship, rather than thinking of reciprocity as a static favour-debt entity. We develop and test such a zone construct using prior validated exchange-based measures (e.g., Perceived Supervisory Support [PSS], Perceived Organisational Support [POS]), perception attitudes (perceived FLM behaviour) and behavioural outcomes (e.g., OCB and commitment). When aggregated, these individual constructs then contribute to unit level outcomes.

Signalling theory informs us that the HR policies of an organisation send messages to both managers and to employees regarding the indeterminacy of reciprocal exchanges (Guest et al., 2021). For example, FLMs can influence the attitudes of their employees (Townsend et al., 2012), with a positive or negative outcome towards commitment and in turn performance (Katou et al., 2021). Cafferkey et al. (2020) show how heterogeneous work groups experience and react differently to a uniform HRM system within an organisation, which reinforces the idea of variable work unit policy implementation. Signalling can also influence the roles of FLMs in how they operationalise higher-level HR policy, as well as how employees respond. Thus, it is probable that FLMs can impact employee performance outcomes, particularly how FLMs implement or adapt organisational-level HR policy (Katou et al., 2021) and employee commitment behaviours (Cafferkey et al., 2018).

However, as FLMs are not a heterogeneous or unified group, nor are they robotic conformists (Marchington & Grugulis, 2000), we test for different FLM types to add a more nuanced granularity to the possible causal chain links. We next explain possible different FLM types.

2.1 | Policy enactor type

Investigating the process of enacting HRM practices has added greater insight to the problem of HR-performance causal chain (Paauwe et al., 2013). Gilbert et al. (2015) investigates the enactment of 28 HR practices as perceived by employees. Aggregating the employee responses, they developed a Line Manager Enactment Index to examine the relationship to employee outcomes. They found a significant positive relationship between FLM enactment and affective commitment in employees. Vermeeren (2014) investigated relationships between implemented HRM practices and unit level performance. The findings revealed support for an effect of HRM practice implementation on both employee perceptions and unit level performance. Interestingly, the specific impact of the FLM enactment may be affected by employee perceptions of the FLM's authority in the organisation as the 'deliverer' of policy signals. This notion that a supervisor who is a visible 'policy enactor' can create a strong psychological climate has been presented both theoretically and empirically (Pak & Kim, 2020). Therefore, a policy enactor is a behavioural type worthy of empirical testing.

2.2 | Leadership behavioural type

The possible leadership behaviour of FLMs may have an expected, yet unknown, impact on employee perceptions of HRM practices. Townsend et al. (2012) and Fu et al. (2020, p. 224) explain how FLMs can balance tensions when implementing workplace issues, with links to commitment, job autonomy, job challenge and job achievement at a team level. Similarly, Gilbert et al. (2015) found that relational-orientated leaders tend to better empower employees through development and consultation. Attempting to measure developmental HRM enactment, without controlling for FLM leadership style, could draw incorrect inferences. Chang et al. (2020) further argue that it is the leadership behaviours of FLMs that are particularly noteworthy because of the informal interactions that cannot be easily captured by formal policies. Thus, a further empirical exploration of leadership behavioural style among FLMs may add to the granularity of the HR-FLM-performance causal chain.

2.3 | Coaching behavioural type

A coaching type is concerned with the individual employee development and may give way to significant variation in approach amongst employees who experience such FLM influences. For example, Agarwal et al. (2009) reveal variation in the levels of coaching intensity among sales managers, with a relationship found between changes in the concentration of coaching by some FLMs, and the corresponding sales performance among team employees. Building on LMX, there are three key features in a FLM coaching behavioural type construct (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). First is the FLM's preferred style; second the degree of follower receptiveness; and finally, the maturity of the FLM-employee relationship. Liu and Batt (2010) further found a direct relationship between FLM coaching and employee performance indicators, such as commitment.

The above three FLM behavioural types were identified in existing literature and selected for their reported influence on possible employee outcomes. These are not exhaustive, as other control, power or emotional relationship dynamics may be important. Nonetheless, they present a starting point for FLM behavioural variability that can be tested empirically in relation to a potential zone for reciprocation in work relationships.

3 | HYPOTHESES AND HR PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Earlier literatures point to the strong association between HRM policy bundles and employee performance outcomes, but with limited theoretical explanation of the employee-manager dynamic (Guest et al., 2021; Pak & Kim, 2020; Purcell et al., 2009). A key causal gap is trying to explain 'how' and 'why' the exchange relationship can lead to

enhanced performance (Katou et al., 2021). The reasons that may account for added employee discretionary effort is to build theory that seeks to explain possible impact (Wood & Budhwar, 2021). We extend SET, integrate signalling theory and build on both LMX and perceived support system theories to empirically test a potential causal link by recognising a more granular exchange dynamic across an area (zone) comprising different FLM roles. Figure 2 outlines the indicative realms for FLMs and workers that constitute the space of a zone for reciprocation.

The model conceptualises a realm where the employee is likely to experience interactions with their FLM and develop specific perceptions and signals about the type of FLM behaviours. The employee can encounter variable perceptions of differing support levels (Eisenberger et al., 2002) and reciprocation (Gouldner, 1960). The employee interprets these signals that develop their own perceptions about their FLM and organisational HR policy (Guest et al., 2021). The research model purports that these phenomena are both measurable and related. The rationale for commitment is built on prior literature about the FLM in the HR-performance chain (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Similarly, OCB is important given its connection in the literature to extra-role behaviour and willingness to help a co-worker (Lee & Allen, 2002). Extra role behaviour mirrors the causal hypotheses of over-compensation in reciprocity. By leveraging the prior work, it is possible to reduce noise in the model and isolate the additive factors of inquiry, namely the zone. Based on previous literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 *Differences in employee (a) OCB, and (b) organisational commitment, are influenced by perceived FLM behavioural types.*

Employee attitudes and behaviours can be affected in various ways by the extent and perception of both supervisory and organisational support systems (Eisenberger et al., 2002). POS framework relates to an individual's perception concerning the degree to which an organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986), namely POS. Support theory contends that favourable POS will be positively related to employee discretionary behaviour. Underlying this framework is the reciprocity as a potential explanatory mechanism relating to employee experiences, attitudes and behaviours arising from FLM operational approaches (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2012). Eisenberger et al. (2002, p. 565) relate this specifically to FLM, arguing that 'just as employees form global perceptions concerning their valuation by the organisation, they develop general views concerning

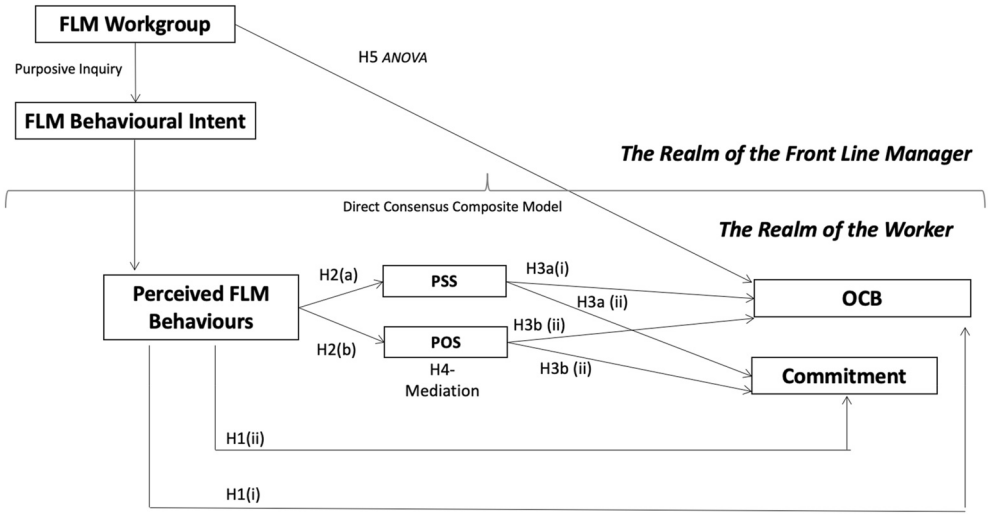

FIGURE 2 Empirical study design to test the FLM relationship with reciprocity and the realm of the worker. FLM, frontline managers; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support

the degree to which supervisors value their contribution and care about their well-being'. In other words, 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 & 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'. Here the POS construct is introduced to recognise variation in the FLMs agency behaviour. It suggests an important degree of discretion amongst FLMs in relation to how they enact organisational HR policy. Recognising the FLM as an agent of the organisation implies some potential impact on employee behaviours, expectations and/or perceptions. Both PSS and POS provide avenues to explore greater nuances to variations of social reciprocity in the HR-FLM-Performance chain. To that end, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 *Perceived FLM behaviours are positively related to the Zone of Reciprocity (e.g., employee perceptions of both (a) PSS and (b) POS).*

Advancing the logic of reciprocity as a zone allows a deeper understanding of the extent to which employees adjust discretionary behaviour in response to signalling messages and various relationships at work. The zone seeks to acknowledge the explanatory role of reciprocity when conceived as a multi-dimensional construct, with potentially contested indeterminacy to the management of employment (Dundon & Dobbins, 2015). The zone seeks to integrate the discrete variables of reciprocity, including perceptions of support, indebtedness to others, or a sense of being controlled by superiors and recognises a space of relationship maturity. It spans work relationships including peers, the work team, the supervisor, and informal leaders (Fu et al., 2020; Katuo et al., 2021).

The proposed model hypothesises that employee adjustments to their discretionary effort may be mediated by both the type of FLM interaction as well as organisational support. Two explanatory mechanisms come to the fore. First, in return for perceived support or (un)favourable treatment, the employee chooses to reciprocate with (un)favourable treatment towards the organisation, in the form of adjusted commitment and OCB. Motivated by a perception of indebtedness, the employee may return additional effort to switch the sense of obligation back to the employer. This dynamic creates a cycle of reciprocity in the relationship as the organisation, in turn, provides further support. Over time, the long-term nature of this cycle engenders higher commitment and a desire among employees to remain working for the organisation. The resulting outcome is that organisational performance increases as discretionary behaviour from employees outweighs the cost of additional support by the organisation. Lack of support may engender the opposite causal outcome, if perceived so by employees.

The second mechanism is the reciprocation of effort by workers towards their FLM. PSS received by employees can increase loyalty, and leader-member relationships may prosper from support beyond what is offered or promised by the organisation. In such situations, FLM support may be reciprocated at the individual level to the workgroup. The employee is cognisant of their unique relationship with a particular FLM: typically, the employee believes their effort will help the FLM. Likewise, absent support may be perceived as unfavourable treatment by the employee, stimulating an opposite causal direction in the relationship.

In order to operationalise these characteristics, the zone of reciprocity seeks to locate different indicators of feelings of support. This zone comprises of POS and PSS as well as different FLM types, including perceived current state of indebtedness in the relationship. Thus, we hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 3 *The Zone of Reciprocity (e.g., PSS (a) and POS (b)) is positively related to Employee Behaviours and Attitudes (e.g., OCB (i) and Commitment (ii)).*

Given that FLM behaviours have been found to have a direct relationship to employee outcomes, the model proposes that the support mechanisms will serve as a mediator explaining the mechanism underlying such a relationship, and therefore the zone of reciprocity is set as a possible mediator. For any FLM behavioural type, the outcomes will be mediated by the employees' perceived zone of reciprocity (e.g., perceptions of support received).

Hypothesis 4 *The Zone of Reciprocity (e.g., PSS (a) and POS (b)) mediate the relationship between perceived FLM Behavioural Types and Employee Behaviours and Attitudes (specifically OCB).*

Lastly, the model conceptualises an exploratory realm of the frontline manager (e.g., top half of Figure 2). Hypothesis 5 tests for differences in employee outcomes based on the aggregated perspective of the FLM behavioural types. Different FLMs can engender different outcomes in group performance (Pak & Kim, 2020), however, the latter authors do not categorise different implementation styles of FLMs. Our study reserves a place for group level analysis with collective employee perceptions constructed into a FLM Work Group, through the means of a direct consensus composite model (Chan, 1998). The FLM Work Group variable is derived from the responses of employees who report to the same FLM. By aggregating the responses of employees who 'work for' the same FLM into one result, we therefore hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 5 *Differences in Employee Behaviours and Attitudes, specifically, OCBs, are influenced by FLM behavioural types (at the work group level).*

4 | RESEARCH METHODS

A quantitative approach was considered appropriate to enable us to empirically test the value of the zone concept. The quantitative approach allows for efficiency in studies of large employee databases. It can enable predictive value of a model to be further explored in future research. In this way, the quantitative measures can open future pathways for added qualitative research. The empirical strategy sought to mitigate common methodological challenges in the HRM field. Criticism of appropriateness of measures, correlations versus causality, reliance on single person data and exclusion of 'hard to measure' items are some examples (Marchington & Grugulis, 2000). Outlined below are the resultant construct and measures.

5 | DATA AND SAMPLE

Medco is a multi-national medical device company headquartered in the United States, with employees dispersed in various functions supporting Sales, Distribution, Manufacturing and Research and Development (Medco Annual Report, 2020). The setting offers a novel and unique context for empirical research: two manufacturing plants, one in Ireland and the other in Mexico, both producing same products and both subject to the same HR system. Importantly, teams of frontline employees worked under the supervision of a specific FLM, thereby offering a controlled sample of workers who matched to designated FLMs. While the research study was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it has since been confirmed that the employees in this study were classified as 'essential frontline workers' during the pandemic. These workers received letters from their employer, on behalf of their respective governments, that entitled them to passage beyond specified distance limits, early vaccine access and the work continues to require 'in-person' attendance. The respondents were purposively selected for consistency of occupational groups, FLMs who managed similar workers and product lines, and consistency of HR practices. Country or cultural variation was not an objective of this research. Of the total of 613 completed surveys from employees who between them reported to 50 FLMs, 41.3% (n = 253) were returned from the Mexico facility, and 58.7% (n = 360) were completed in Ireland. This represents an 84% response rate in Mexico, and 82% in Ireland. Tests for sample size power were performed for estimation of mean and variance.

The employees in both plants are organised into work units that report directly to an FLM. The harmonisation of the quality system meant that both plants had very similar duties and responsibilities for staff, manufacturing the

same products. The similarity in plants enabled a larger sample size to be gathered at the level of analysis, namely FLM and their direct subordinate employee. The absence of a significant correlation between facility and nationality with the dependent variable, OCB, lends support to the sample as an aggregated unit for analysis (see Table 1).

A translation process was followed to convert the English survey to Mexican Spanish. The typical FLM role at Medco organises and supervises employees, and all FLMs in both facilities, have direct responsibility for implementing HR policy. The FLM is often seen as responsible for the output of the employees they directly supervise, including total units produced, labour required, scrap product, and adherence to quality procedures.

6 | MEASURES

6.1 | Perceived FLM behaviours

FLM behavioural scales were developed by drawing on a broad spectrum of managerial studies to understand the type of behaviours that FLMs engage in that are found to have a relationship to employee outcomes and performance. A composite scale was developed incorporating a series of FLM behaviours that previous research found to positively correlate with improved outcomes. The Perceived FLM Behaviours measure the extent to which a particular FLM style is perceived, by their direct employees, to display a broad spectrum of behaviours, allowing for a more granular interpretation of the FLM-employee relationship. In summary, the more that an FLM is perceived to enact HRM policy, demonstrate strong leadership traits, or coaching methods, then the higher the resultant score for each respective FLM behavioural style variable. To operationalise the variable, a scale comprised of three major behavioural types was collated.

'*Policy Enactment*' is measured by the extent to which employees have perceived their FLM to actively enact the HR policies. In total, 10 HR practices are included in the survey, developed from previous studies on HR practices (Huselid, 1995; Macduffie, 1995). The survey prompts respondents to select a frequency for each practice in response to the following statement, 'In the last 6 months, my FLM has spent time with me (individually) on…'. A list follows of 10 practices, including 'Formal Performance Reviews' and 'Training Opportunities' for example, accounting for items 1–10 on the survey. Respondents tick the most appropriate of the following responses: daily; weekly; monthly; once; never; and don't know.

The '*Leadership Behaviour*' uses a Likert scale to capture employee perceptions of their FLM's leader style. Fu et al. (2020) report FLM influence in the consistency of HR enactment. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) used a 'leadership' scale to discern a supervisory approach which influenced employee effort. The scale seeks to assess employees' experience of the FLM in relation to leadership activity, such as communication. For example, one item states 'My FLM is good at keeping everyone up to date with proposed changes'. The responses are from 'Strongly Agree = 5', to 'Strongly Disagree = 1' and 'Don't know = missing'. Where an item is stated in the negative, a reverse coding is applied whereby 'Strongly Disagree = 5' etc.

'*Coaching Behaviours*' is drawn from Heslin et al. (2005) and includes items that focussed on positive developmental support, such as 'my FLM acts as a sounding board for me to develop my ideas', and 'my FLM supports me taking on new challenges'. It adds an additional dimension to the communication and involvement indicators of leadership above. HR practices in this area include a greater focus on coaching and mentoring supports for employees, and how they link to performance outcomes, specifically OCB and commitment (Agarwal et al., 2009; Liu & Batt, 2010).

6.2 | FLM work group

The method used to identify FLM Workgroup is based on a direct consensus composite model (Chan, 1998), where the meaning of the higher-level construct, namely FLM style, is in the consensus among the lower-level units (i.e., the

TABLE 1 Correlation table

	Factors	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
	Dependent variables—Outcomes																
1	OCB	3.80	0.58	-													
2	Commitment	4.25	0.62	0.364***	-												
	Zone of reciprocity—Mediators																
3	POS	3.68	0.68	0.299***	0.546***	-											
4	PSS	3.82	0.73	0.266***	0.337***	0.503***	-										
	FLM variables																
5	Perceived FLM behaviours	2.53	0.59	0.251***	0.385***	0.436***	0.495***	-									
	Control variables																
6	Facility	-	-	-	(0.115)*	(0.105)*	0.248***	0.530***	-								
7	Nationality	-	-	-	-	-	0.189***	0.335***	0.629***	-							
8	Gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.119*	0.320***	0.234***	-						
9	Union membership	-	-	-	(0.148)***	(0.160)***	0.092*	(0.358)***	(0.626)***	(0.321)***	-	-					
10	Education level	-	-	-	(0.088)*	0.094*	(0.151)***	(0.389)***	(0.091)***	(0.397)***	(0.253)***	(0.365)***	-				
11	Age	-	-	(0.144)***	-	-	-	(0.183)**	(0.287)***	(0.103)*	-	0.405***	-	-			
12	Years with FLM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.283***	-	0.153***	-		
13	Employment tenure	-	-	-	(0.101)*	(0.185)***	-	(0.229)***	0.305***	(0.168)***	0.133**	0.737***	0.108*	0.509***	0.350***	-	
14	Working hours	-	-	-	-	-	0.148***	0.171**	-	-	(0.158)***	(0.124)**	-	-	-	-	-
15	Employment contract	-	-	0.68*	-	-	(0.156)***	0.171*	0.380***	0.334***	0.249***	0.396***	(0.337)***	(0.185)***	(0.299)***	0.513***	(0.117)**

Note: n = 312–613 responses per survey item, Statistical significant of correlation denoted as follows *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001. Not applicable or insignificant (p > 0.05) data are denoted with a -.

Abbreviations: FLM, frontline managers; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support.

individual employee responses). According to Chan (1998) this is the most common of the composite models used in research that typically follows a two-step approach. Firstly, the constructs are defined as two distinct variables, a separate lower-level and higher-level construct. In this study, individual employee perception of FLM behaviour is the lower-level construct. Employee respondents are assigned to an FLM identifier to group them together for analysis. The FLM identifier ensured correct work group alignment, so employees could answer the survey regarding the FLM known to be leading their specific work group allowing the opportunity to pair FLMs to employee responses across workgroup units.

6.3 | Mediating variables

PSS is measured by a scale with highest factor loadings from Eisenberger et al. (2002). This scale has a reverse-coded statement. The scale assesses the perceived support that the FLM gives to the employee with emphasis on verbs such as 'cares', 'values' and 'considers'. The same PSS items are used for POS replacing FLM with the word 'organisation'.

6.4 | Employee commitment variables

A 3-item Organisational Commitment scale is adapted from the Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) which focussed specifically on the frontline manager making it particularly relevant to research about HRM and performance relationships. Items included 'pride to work for organisation', 'loyalty to organisation', and 'identification with company values'.

6.5 | Employee OCBs

Adapted from previous studies of OCBs (Lee et al., 2019; Smith et al., 1983), the research instrument contains a 6-item scale to measure OCB investigating the discretionary effort directed towards employee co-workers (Lee & Allen, 2002; Lee et al., 2019), including willingness to help others with work-related problems, to adjust their schedule and to make people feel welcome in the group. It includes a reverse coded item which states, 'I rarely assist others with their duties'.

6.6 | Control variables

Control variables included: site; nationality; age; gender; union membership; tenure reporting to current FLM; organisational tenure; education; working hours (full-time vs. part-time) and contract type.

6.7 | Testing the model

Multivariate analysis was deployed as it is concerned with the relationships between independent variables of FLM behaviours and workgroup and the dependent variables (OCB and commitment). In addition, the study is interested in the relationships of the reciprocity related variables, PSS and POS. Each construct scale is subjected to principal components analysis. The single variable (aggregated factor) is calculated by averaging the retained items in the scale (Kuvass, 2006). The reduction process is informed by the eigenvalue (include only those >1) and the scree

plot (Bryman & Cramer, 1996, p. 258). Final scales were assessed for Cronbach Alpha statistic with an acceptance value of >0.7 (Peterson, 1994). To further understand and test the latent variables, confirmatory factor analysis was performed.

The output of the factor analysis is used to convert the individual item scores to a single variable to be used for hypothesis testing. Once scale consistency was established, initial relationship patterns were modelled. Particular attention is paid to the *r* value between independent variables, as values of greater than 0.8 may be exhibiting multicollinearity. Multicollinearity may be a problem for the next stage of analysis, namely regression. Table 1 shows the significant correlation statistics.

To test the direct effect hypotheses the control variables are first regressed onto the dependent variables, followed by the FLM behaviours. The probability of a relationship not existing (*p*-value) is used to determine the statistical significance of any association. The total variation explained by the model is identified by the 'adjusted *R*-squared' statistic. These statistics are reported in the findings section for all three stages of the hierarchical regression: (1) Control Variables; (2) Direct Relationships, and (3) Mediation. However, as the third regression stage is contingent on an investigation of mediation, we share some further detail here.

The study conceptualises a single step multiple mediator model (Hayes, 2009), where multiple mediators are within the zone of reciprocity (e.g., POS and PSS), and the single step exists between 'FLM Behavioural Types' and 'Employee Behaviours and Attitudes' (e.g., employee commitment and OCBs). In other words, the hypotheses predict that among the ways in which FLM behaviour exerts an effect on employees, it is through the intervening 'zone of reciprocity' variables. The most widely used method to ascertain mediation effect is the Baron and Kenny (1986) causal steps approach (Hayes, 2009). Additional mediating testing included bootstrapping techniques (Preacher et al., 2007). Hayes (2009) describes the advantages of bootstrapping to be one of the more valid and powerful methods. The inference is based on an estimate of the indirect effect itself and it requires fewer assumptions regarding distribution and error. Finally, it can be used in complex models including multiple mediators, such as this study.

6.8 | Factor analysis results

Factors in the study are adjusted and extracted on the basis of five criteria (Ford et al., 1986), in order of I to V (I Observations to Variable Ratio (minimum of 10 observations per variable included); II Principle Component Analysis and Varimax Rotation (Best fit Factors); III Factor Loadings Pattern and Value; (Per Factor Loadings Plot, acceptable at >0.4); IV Eigenvalues (Acceptable >1.0 with corresponding sharp drop in Scree Plot); and, V Cronbach Alpha (Acceptable at >0.7). Factor scores are then summed for analysis as required (Ford et al., 1986). The remaining empirical data loaded onto many individual factors that emerged as expected based on the scale selection and final survey design. Such variables were analysed using SEM programme in AMOS 26. The variables demonstrated adequate model fit given sample size and study type, including a c2/df = 1174/612 = 1.91 with *p*-value <0.001, a comparative fit index of 0.903, a root-mean-square error of approximation of 0.67, and an acceptable standardised root-mean-square residual (SRMR) of 0.788. Following acceptable model fit, the *Perceived FLM Behaviour Variable* was successfully loaded on a single summary factor with satisfactory values (Cronbach statistic 0.78, Eigenvalue 4.41) for the final aggregation and regression analysis.

The study confirmed factor loadings for *POS* and *PSS* with Cronbach alpha of 0.878 and 0.882 respectively. The three item Commitment scale loaded on to one single factor, with all factor loadings acceptable at >0.4. The Cronbach alpha statistic is 0.854, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Cronbach alpha for the OCB scale indicates acceptable internal consistency of 0.758. On review of the confirmatory factor analysis, one item has a slightly lower loading than is desirable (0.323). Given the scale is adopted from previous studies with successful validation (Lee & Allen, 2002) and the Cronbach alpha is acceptable, the study proceeds with all items in the scale to sum an overall OCB factor score.

7 | FINDINGS

As outlined in Figure 3 below, all hypotheses were accepted in the study. Perceived FLM behaviours were found to influence OCB and Commitment outcomes with co-efficient of 0.26, and 0.29 respectively (e.g., H1(i) and H1(ii)). Both PSS and POS are found to be directly influenced by perceived FLM behaviour (coefficients of 0.67 and 0.4, for H2(a) and H2(b) respectively). The relationship between PSS and employee commitment and OCB was confirmed (H3(i), and for POS and employee commitment and OCB (H3(ii)). The findings show that the impact on support measured at the supervisory level (PSS), is more influenced by the FLM behaviours, than the broader organisational support (POS) variable. Likewise, the data demonstrate that the perceived FLM behaviours measured here do not account for all variation in the specific behaviours that matter as a zone for reciprocity.

Having confirmed the direct relationships in the model, we then tested for mediation. An indirect effect was found for both PSS and POS with 95% confidence (PSS = CI 0.084, 0.190; POS = 0.076, 0.162). The finding supports the hypothesis (H4) that the influence of FLM behaviours on employee outcomes is mediated by perceptions of reciprocity, specifically PSS and POS, which constitute the zone of reciprocity.

The impact of FLM behavioural types on employee outcomes was further confirmed at the aggregate workgroup level (H5), as there was a significant difference found in employee responses when categorised by FLM. The final result includes the OCB data only, as the commitment variable did not meet the required assumptions of the test. While this in itself does not provide evidence of causation, the intermediary variables that tested the causal hypothesis for a zone of reciprocity provides supporting signals.

The resulting model following hierarchical regression revealed that the statistical probability that the model presents a false relationship was less than 1% in all direct cases, and less than 5% in the case of mediation. In other words, all hypotheses tested are confirmed with a certainty of greater than 95% in all cases, (i.e., p-value ≤ 0.05). Table 2 summarises the relative confidence level for each hypothesis.

Finding that the hypotheses in the study are supported, attention turns to the theoretical and practical impact of such a result. A further assessment of the regression model was performed to check the relative impact on discretionary effort (OCB). The assessment found that the FLM behaviours and control variables by themselves can account

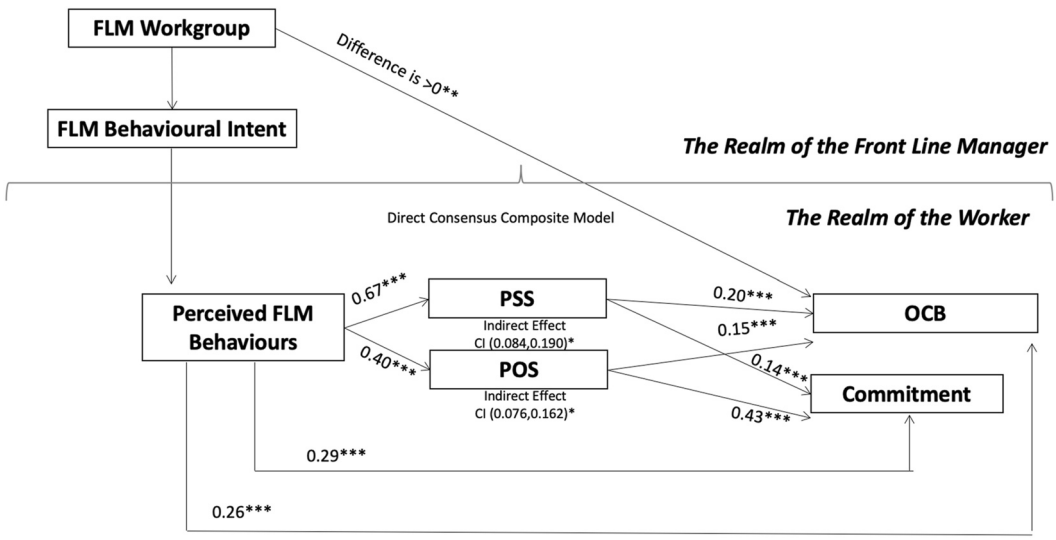

FIGURE 3 Results of empirical study. $p < 0.05^{*}$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$. Standardised regression co-efficient data. For illustrative purposes the 95% CI for indirect effect quoted in diagram is the largest observed in the study. FLM, frontline managers; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support

for 20% of the variation observed in OCB responses (e.g., see Figure 4). Importantly, when the zone of reciprocity is added to the model, the transfer function increases in explanatory power, accounting now for 25% of the variation in OCB. Given that the opportunity for measurement error in studies of behavioural and attitudinal in nature, these r-squared values are relatively strong.

8 | DISCUSSION

In this article we follow an established body of research that recognises FLMs as a key agent likely to influence the relationship between HRM and employee performance outcomes. It is already known that the relationship between managers and their immediate subordinates is a dynamic one: at times cooperative, but also strained and subject to

TABLE 2 Hypothesis summary

Identifier	Hypothesis	Supported/ rejected	*p*-value
H1 (a)	Differences in employee OCB are influenced by perceived FLM behaviours	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H1 (b)	Differences in employee organisational commitment are influenced by perceived FLM behaviours	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H2 (a)	Employee perception of support, PSS, is influenced by perceived FLM behaviours	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H2 (b)	Employee perception of support, POS, is influenced by perceived FLM behaviours	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H3 (a)i	Perceived support PSS positively supports OCB	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H3 (a)ii	Perceived support PSS positively supports organisational commitment	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H3 (b)i	Perceived support POS is positively support OCB	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H3 (b)ii	Perceived support POS positively supports organisational commitment	Supported	$p < 0.001$
H4 (a)	Perceived support, PSS, mediates the relationship between perceived FLM behaviours and OCB	Supported	$p < 0.05$
H4 (b)	Perceived support, POS, mediates the relationship between perceived FLM behaviours and OCB	Supported	$p < 0.05$
H5	Differences in employee OCB outcomes are influenced by their FLM workgroup	Supported	$p < 0.01$

Abbreviations: FLM, frontline managers; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support.

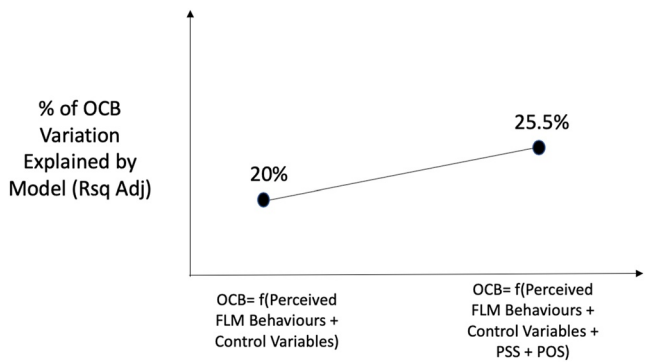

FIGURE 4 Change in OCB explained by the model (hierarchical regression *R*-Sqd values). FLM, frontline managers; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

antagonism, stress, and potential distribution (Edwards et al., 2006; Heffernan & Dundon, 2016). It has also been realised that FLMs are not a single homogeneous group; therefore, the presumed link between HRM and organisational performance is never a straightforward or easy one (Bos-Nehles et al., 2021; Combs et al., 2006; Guest, 2021). Indeed, much the of prescriptive HR literature tends to ignore or neglect the structured antagonisms in the chain between HR policy design, its enactment at work unit level, and potential worker responses to HR policy. From our research, we contribute to theory (and practice knowledge) with the idea of social reciprocation as a zone: that is, a moving space or area, which is both more fluid and dynamic than a single favour-indebtedness transaction. Our general theoretical contribution of a '*zone of reciprocity*' helps address macro knowledge debates in the field of HR and performance, with a specific focus on different FLM role behaviours and associated employee performance outcomes of OCB and organisational commitment.

8.1 | Theoretical contribution

The evidence presents two primary contributions to towards more generalisable theoretical knowledge concerning the role of FLMs and HR-performance outcomes. Firstly, by building on the intellectual roots of reciprocity traced back to early industrial sociology (e.g., Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960), the research demonstrates the existence of a broader sphere of social interactions and influences, presented here as a 'zone of reciprocity', which displayed measurable characteristics (e.g. FLMs involving employees, supporting staff training, acting as a conduit for worker suggestions, among others - see the measures Table A1 in the Appendix) to offer knowledge in a general way beyond the immediate research setting about 'how' and 'why' FLMs influence employee performance outcomes.

Significantly, the zone of reciprocity represents a new space of social workplace interactions, that is, the different styles of FLMs, and how they enact and/or re-configure organisational-level HR intended policy. Of further importance in our conceptual model is that the zone can also be affected by employees, through the perceptions and signals they receive about the support systems available to them, and how their immediate FLM deals with issues and wider HR company policy. Thus, by building such a zone construct, we can better differentiate FLM types, which helps explain with refined precision some of the reciprocation underlying a HR-performance chain. The relationship between HR policies, through FLM behavioural styles and implementation actions, shows a robust link to various employee performance outcomes, evidenced in OCBs and organisational commitment at a higher group level.

From the above we argue that it is the variety of daily interactions between employees and their FLMs that represents a fluid and at times uneven zone of reciprocity that remains contestable yet also more dynamic than a previous static favour-indebtedness transaction to reciprocity. To this end, it can be more helpful to understand not only organisational performance measures, but also employee reactions to the signals they receive about how FLMs may enact HRM. Within this zone, employee behaviours are shaped by the FLM's actual implementation of HR practices, and their perceptions of organisational and supervisor support. Our study is one step in developing theory around FLM granularity that allows for transferability of content and context (Cooke, 2018).

Our second theoretical contribution adds to academic debates by expanding on the idea that FLMs are neither robotic conformists (Marchington & Grugulis, 2000), nor a homogenous group (Kehoe & Han, 2019; Kilroy & Dundon, 2015). We show that different FLM behavioural types affect employee outcomes in different ways. Significantly, it is this variance of FLM type that is a new contribution adding important mediating granularity to knowledge about HR-performance causal chain links. For example, the 'HR policy enactment' type, relative to other behavioural types, was shown to have a greater propensity to positively influence OCBs and commitment. This contribution develops some clarity and assists in building nuance in complex and uncertain knowledge areas. From this presentation of different FLM styles, a more refined and generalisable understanding is advanced concerning the way that employees receive the signals about HR policy, as actioned by their immediate FLM, within a zone that is shaped by organisational support and supervisory roles. That is to say, just as FLMs respond to their local circumstances, so too do employees act on FLM behaviours (Guest, 2021, pp. 189–190).

Furthermore, our theoretical development has provided a model to unpick the causal chain links within a zone that filters HR policy design, FLM enactment or adjustment to such policy, and how workers react to the FLM and organisational signals they encounter. An important theoretical contribution of the zone of reciprocity is constructed showing different FLM styles and approaches. Our study also has important practical implications for organisations.

8.2 | Practical implications

Our empirical evidence shows that the three different FLM behavioural types all display statistically significant and variable results. Recognising the diversity of FLM roles and their respective individual employees, a 'zone' approach could be practically helpful to post-pandemic challenges, such as retention, re-skilling, or new working-from-home concerns. The zone may be practically important to build engagement and/or pinpoint required organisational support under new post-Covid demands. It is only once an organisation understand the dominant 'style' of their FLMs, can they provide these FLMs with focussed resources to both recognise and address their shortcomings and to capitalise on their strengths. Furthermore, for those managers and employees who have no choice but to attend work 'in-person' with customer-facing jobs, the zone or reciprocity can shed light on areas for more equitable treatment and safe working support systems.

Our research shows that by recognising employees receive signals about HR policy intent, then support systems could be adjusted with resources to empower FLMs in policy enactment and/or coaching development and leadership. The practice and policy insights can therefore help create more definitive links to both improved organisational performance measures, and possible employee equity outcomes, that other FLM behavioural types can sustain. In short, as HR professionals shape the future of work, the inclusion of specific support for different FLM styles can increase performance, and employees may receive clearer intended signals how the organisation views and treats them.

8.3 | Future research and limitations

Future lines of inquiry can include several potential variables to strengthen the zone of reciprocity and its relationship to other performance outcomes. For example, trust, emotional regulation, power and control. While these variables may also be exhibited by FLMs within the zone, they are also likely to influence the content and context of reciprocity of work relationships. Other characterises and behavioural types can embellish (or question) the zone construct further, through the use of rich qualitative data as well as quantitative testing. Extending these understandings could help expand the zone of reciprocity as a tool for further construct development and practice implementation. It can be helpful for other researchers to extend the elements of the zone, for example, by examining areas such as work dignity, stress, wellbeing features of social workplace reciprocity. While we have tested three FLM styles in this study, the zone offers a new template or framing for future research to develop and build additional FLM typologies in other organisational and cultural settings. Importantly, the findings from this article can sustain a research agenda regarding not only FLM, but also frontline workers, who have been both heroes and victims of the pandemic years. This novel zone construct can encourage practitioners and researchers to continue to pursue frontline worker employment enhancements with a refined understanding of different FLM styles to support safer and better working environments in helping equality, diversity and inclusion as well as performance outcomes.

However, as with all research designs, there are limitations to the theoretical generalisability from our evidence and analysis. While we selected OCBs and commitment in this study derived from well validated measures in the extant literature, there are other important possibilities that future research could examine; for example, Covid-pandemic work effects, or how the zone can shed insight around those who transition to remote or homeworking. Issues such as intention to quit, work precarity, work intensification, stress, employee voice and wellbeing are also high on the

policy and future research agenda that the zone of reciprocity can make for new and meaningful contributions. In essence, the zone of reciprocity is a generalisable theoretical construct that allows the further development of context-specific considerations for future research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest in producing this paper and there was no funding.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions from the organisation that granted access to employees for survey data.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Scales used

Variable	Factors/items	Sources	Cronbach alpha
Policy enactment behaviour	In the last 6 months, my front line manager has spent time with me (individually) on:	Adapted from Huselid (1995), Appelbaum et al. (2000)	0.8547
	Control-based enactment	(Wording refined for research context during pilot)	
	Time-keeping & attendance		
	Disciplinary/corrective action		
	Commitment-based enactment		
	Formal performance appraisal		0.8736
	Training opportunities		
	Career development or educational opportunities		
	Recognition (formal/informal)		
	Rewards, compensation/benefits		
	Involvement-based enactment		
	Following up on employee ideas		0.8564
	Problem-solving at my area of work		
Leadership behaviour	**5 Items**	Adapted from Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) used in a study about FLM and employee outcomes	0.8909
	My front line manager is good at keeping everyone up to date with proposed changes		
	My front line manager is good at providing everyone with a chance to comment on proposed changes		
	My front line manager is good at responding to suggestions from employees		
	My front line manager is good at dealing with problems at the workplace		
	My front line manager is good at treating employees fairly		
Coaching behaviour	**Employee voice coaching**	Adapted from Heslin et al. (2005)	0.856
	My frontline manager acts as a sounding board for me to develop my ideas		
	My frontline manager offers useful suggestions on how I can improve my performance		
	My frontline manager facilitates problem-solving		
	My frontline manager encourages me to explore and try out alternatives		
	My frontline manager supports me taking on challenges		
	Managerial focussed coaching		0.868
	My frontline manager provides guidance regarding performance expectation		
	My frontline manager helps me analyse my performance		

TABLE A1 (Continued)

Variable	Factors/items	Sources	Cronbach alpha
PSS	My frontline manager cares about my wellbeing My frontline manager values my contributions to the organisation's wellbeing My frontline manager cares about my opinions My frontline manager considers my goals and values My frontline manager is willing to help me when I need a special favour My frontline manager shows very little concern for me	Adapted from Eisenberger et al. (1986). (Eisenberger et al., 2002 used three of these highest loading items, this study expanded to six of the highest loading)	0.878
POS	My organisation cares about my wellbeing My organisation values my contributions to its wellbeing My organisation cares about my opinions My organisation considers my goals and values My organisation is willing to help me when I need a special favour My organisation shows very little concern for me	Repeat of PSS scale. Replaced frontline manager with organisation, per approach in Eisenberger et al. (1986), Eisenberger et al. (2002)	0.882
OCB	I help others who have returned to work after been absent I willingly give my time to help others who have work-related problems I adjust my work schedule to accommodate other employees' requests for time off I go out of the way to make newer employees feel welcome in the work group I give up time to help others who have work or non-work problems I rarely assist others with their duties	Adapted from Coyle-Shapiro (2002)	0.758
Commitment	I feel proud to tell people who I work for I feel loyal to my company I share the values of my company	Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) study regarding impact of FLM on commitment	0.854

Abbreviations: FLM, frontline managers; OCB, organisational citizenship behaviours; POS, perceived organisational support; PSS, perceived supervisor support.