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INFLUENCING ONE'S SUPERIOR: AN ASSESSMENT & EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

Upward influence - the process of managing one's boss - has become a legitimate management concept. Developmental-stage instruments are offered here for assessing request self-reported skills, perceived payoff, willingness, likelihood of success ethicality, and boss's negativity, as well as the individual's differential willingness to engage in each of 20 influence behaviors. A class assignment provided students with the opportunity to choose to apply selected behaviors, and assess their success. Illustrations of the class's strategies are provided, as well as subjective observations on its success and suggestions regarding future use.

INTRODUCTION

"Management" has traditionally focused primarily on downward relations with subordinates in organizations. However, its most simple traditional definition--getting things done through people--leaves flexible the directions that such influence might take, including downward, upward and lateral.

The idea (and presumed legitimacy) of managing one's boss (engaging in upward influence) is relatively new--virtually a product of the decade of the 1980's. This delayed interest may be a product of the presumptuousness of the idea that subordinates have the right to even indirectly influence their superiors, or it may be a function of the deeper concern over the issue of control and the possibility of whether or not one should be allowed to have a direct impact on one's boss. Implicitly, perhaps, many persons acknowledge that if they assert their right to influence their boss, then they are simultaneously acknowledging the right of their subordinates to influence themselves. They may view this idea with considerable trepidation.

Nevertheless, the popular press has become intrigued with the idea of managing one's boss. Gabarro and Kotter [1] broke the ice when they proclaimed in the HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW that subordinates "need to establish and manage relationships with everyone on whom they are dependent, and that includes the boss." They focused on understanding the boss and his/her context, assessing oneself and your needs, and developing and maintaining a relationship through a variety of behaviors. Walter Kiechel, in his **"Off** ice Hours" section of FORTUNE magazine [2] reported that, according to various psychologists, consultants, and business professors managing one's boss is very much like the Oriental discipline of "aikido"--the art of throwing one's opponent without touching him/her.

Bob Mezoff, in a presentation to trainers [3], suggested that employees need to help their boss succeed by visualizing their superior's job, anticipating questions, taking charge, being self- critical, and being reliable. On the avoidance side, he also suggested not bluffing, concealing bad news, pressing a personal crusade, being half informed, or being too brash. Several "how to" books have also hit the bookstores with prescriptions for success, including Berkley's advice [4] on using assertiveness and better communication, Hegarty's [5] "practical, proven, and potent steps to make you immediately more valuable to your organization, your boss, and most importantly, yourself," and Rogers' tips to tame a difficult boss [6] (agreeing on priorities, making your boss feel important, being a good listener, and having a sense of humor).

Academic writers, too, have begun considering the viability of influencing one's superior while providing a conceptual and empirical basis for the idea. It is possible to conceive of boss- management as an element in Kerr's [7] concept of "substitutes for leadership", wherein there are characteristics of the task and the organization, or behaviors of the employees, that make it possible for a manager to not have to engage in direct leadership behaviors. Manz and Sims [8] have suggested that self-leadership could take the place of some managerial responsibilities, and perhaps those same roles could be directed in an upward fashion. Sims and Manz [9] have also provided research data supporting the idea that leaders and subordinates exist in a reciprocal relationship, with each affecting the other.

The point of the above review and discussion is to indicate that the process of influencing one's superior has become a popular and legitimate topic of interest to practitioners and academicians alike. Whole courses (e.g., at the Harvard Business School) and modules in other courses elsewhere, as well as chapters in Organizational Behavior textbooks are devoted to issues surrounding "Organizational Politics". Consequently, an emerging challenge for the management professor is to identify the appropriate tools for acquainting students with the concept of influencing one's superior, the issues surrounding it, and the skills/behaviors involved in the process. This paper will report on the initial development of an assessment instrument and an experiential (class-related) exercise that focuses specifically on influencing one's superior.

The Assessment

A review of the popular literature produced almost no instruments for the measurement of subordinate influence on superiors. Aside from self-

assessments of self-esteem and time management, the only questionnaires discovered assessed superior-subordinate relationships (e.g., "Do you have a friendly relationship with your boss?") or a set of scenarios tapping the openness with which a subordinate would respond to his/her boss on a variety of occasions.

The literature did implicitly suggest, however, that the actual process of influencing one's superior might be a function of six key factors: the individual's personal skill/ability in that area, the employee's perception of the potential payoff from doing so, the individual's willingness to engage in the activities, a probability assessment of the likelihood of inducing a meaningful change in the superior's behavior, the value judgment of the ethicality of such attempts, and a general assessment of the receptivity of bosses to modification efforts by employees. Consequently, these six factors were operationally stated and placed on 7-point Likert-type scales (e.g., 1=low, 7=high) and combined into a single questionnaire (see Appendix 1).

The questionnaire was administered to a sample group of two classes of junior/senior level students in an introductory course in management, with total enrollment of 98. Collected prior to any discussion of the topic in class, the results are shown in Table 1. The data, provided here for illustration only, suggest that these students perceive that there may be considerable value or payoff ensuing from the active management of one's superior and that they are somewhat willing to expend the effort necessary to do so. This is quite interesting in light of the fact that they judged the typical boss to be somewhat unreceptive to employee attempts to change his/her behavior, and were also a bit skeptical about the ethical appropriateness of trying to do so. Predictably, they reported that they had only a modest level of influencing ability at the present, and were unsure of the probability of effecting substantial changes.

TABLE 1
SIX DIMENSIONS OF INFLUENCING ONE'S SUPERIOR

DIMENSION	MEAN RATING* (n=98)
Potential Payoff	5.08
Willingness to Influence	4.81
Current Ability	4.29
Probable Success	4.26
Ethical Appropriateness	4.07
Superiors' Receptivity	3.01

*1=low; 7=high

A second questionnaire (Appendix 2) was developed by identifying many of the specific behavioral prescriptions advocated in the popular literature, determining where they overlapped, and condensing them into a set of twenty items that contained a variety ranging from passive to active and seemingly "safe" to considerably "risky." These were again placed on 7-point Likert-type scales, where the focus was on an expansion of one of the scales from the first questionnaire--the students' willingness to engage in each of these behaviors so as to manage their (future) boss's behavior.

For illustrational purposes, the data from the concurrent administration of this second questionnaire to the same students described above are shown in Table 2. Here the sample data show a substantial variation in the reported willingness to engage in the twenty items.

TABLE 2
REPORTED WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE IN INFLUENCING BEHAVIORS

RANK	DIMENSION	MEAN*
1	Upward Consultation	5.27
2	Upward Assertiveness	5.20
3	Attentive/Receptive Listening	5.13
4	Non-Invasion of Boss's Territory	4.90
5	Active Interaction	4.88
6	Active Non-Irritation	4.85
7	Active Self Disclosure	4.12
8	Active Socializing	3.97
9	Self Stroking	3.78
10	Conscious Style Matching	3.42
11	Positive Stroking	3.36
12	Grapevine Sharing	3.12
13	Action Before Permission	2.68
14	Informational Withholding	2.62
15	Weakness Exploitation	2.49
16	Circumvention for Credit	2.48
17	Unpredictability	2.44
18	Late Arrivals	1.91
19	Whistleblowing	1.81
20	Timely Threats to Quit	1.67

*1=low, 7=high

The Exercise

The questionnaires described above were used primarily for the purpose of intellectually "hooking" the students' interest in the general idea of influencing their superior. The data were fed back to them to illustrate a) the diversity of their responses (e.g., the frequency distributions for each item) from within a presumably homogeneous group, b) the number of factors (e.g., ethicality, receptivity, potential payoff) that must be considered before a superior-influence process could be successfully initiated, and c) which of the numerous behaviors were deemed to be more acceptable by their colleagues. Class discussion then revolved around questions like:

"What do the data in Tables 1 and 2 mean to you?",

"Why do you think there was such a wide range of responses to each of the six scales in questionnaire 1?",

"Do you think that equal weight should be placed on all six scales (Or should one, such as perceived receptivity, be given substantially more emphasis)?",

"Why were some of the items in questionnaire 2 judged to be unacceptable?"

"What other types of behaviors involved in influencing one's superior can you suggest?"

The real challenge, however, was to construct an exercise that would force students to implement some of the upward-influence behaviors, instead of just intellectually considering them and speculating on their merits. Subsequent to the class discussion, students (working in small teams) were given this assignment:

"Consider your professor in this class as your "boss" for the next week. As a group, discuss what kinds of specific actions your members will engage in during the next few days so as to attempt to "manage" his behavior. Consider carefully your: 1. ABILITY to use those actions effectively; 2. the POTENTIAL PAYOFF from doing so; 3. your collective WILLINGNESS to expend the necessary effort; 4. the PROBABILITY that some change might occur; 5. the ETHICAL APPROPRIATENESS of the actions you choose; and 6. the probable RECEPTIVENESS OF THE RECIPIENT.

Develop a written action plan. Specify the ACTIONS your group will take; RATE each of them on the six factors above on a scale from 1-7 (1=10w; 7=high); IMPLEMENT your plan; discuss and CRITIQUE its effectiveness; and report your collective REACTION to the concept of managing one's boss."

Conclusions

The results of the combined assessment and experiential exercise, though highly subjective, were satisfactory and met this instructor's criteria for a successful learning experience: 1. The students were given a structured opportunity to discover and report their personal positions on several facets of the general subject of influencing one's superior. 2. They were also provided with a peer groups assessment on those six facets for purposes of providing a larger frame of reference. 3. This was followed by open discussion of the meaning and interpretation of the group data. 4. The class was then required to construct, implement, and assess the results of an action plan for changing their "superior." Instructor observations of the small group action planning discussions suggests that they were lively and filled with intrigue (groups wanted neither other groups nor the instructor to overhear their ideas). Group members had to wrestle with the fact that, in a team process, there would be differing perceptions of the potential payoff, ethicality, etc. of each of the influencing behaviors they proposed. Several students expressed initial disbelief that the instructor actually wanted them to carry out their action plans (This was quite likely the product of this being their first-ever exposure to experiential learning in a collegiate business class.) Finally, the subjective student reactions received following the exercise were, without exception, positive. In particular, students were hungry for feedback on the instructor's assessment of the appropriateness and impact of their action plans.

The final debriefing (one week later, when the written papers were due) began by asking a representative of each team to give a brief summary of their plan (a brief summary of some of the action plan items is presented in Table 3) and the results of it. A guided discussion followed on the similarities and differences among the plans, as well as possible changes they would make if they were to have the opportunity to do it again.

TABLE 3

SAMPLE CLASSROOM UPWARD INFLUENCE STRATEGIES

1. Giving the superior gifts.

2. Get to know the superior on a personal level through visits, etc.

3. Offer to assist on the instructor's research projects.

4. Ask extra questions in class to gain recognition.

5. Make focused requests for change in class assignments.

6. Reward the instructor (apples; candy bars; eye contact)

7. Ask for advice and input.

8. Send a singing telegram to class to compliment the instructor.

9. Invite the instructor to lunch with the group member.

10. Contact the department head to praise or complain about him.

11. Take members of his family and hold them hostage for the promise of good grades.

12. Accusations of unauthorized use of school property as a threat to obtain better grades.

13. Initiate a class petition calling for a reduction in workload.

14. Write anonymous letters to the professor.

15. Make anonymous phone calls.

16. Make direct complaints in class about an element of the course.

Although the questionnaires were not administered a second time, there seemed to be general agreement that most of their mean scale responses (On Questionnaire #1) would now be higher. For example,

1. they felt like they had an improved capacity to influence a superior's behavior (at least in terms of awareness of a broad array of possible options);

2. they perceived more awareness of the potential value from doing so (since in this case they discovered that they weren't penalized for their influence attempts, although they were still uncertain of the risks in a "real" work situation); In particular, they discovered in several cases that the classroom environment (its culture) could indeed be adapted to better fit their needs (e.g., due dates could be altered; the relative weights of grading factors could be modified; a closer student- professor relationship could be nurtured).

3. they were increasingly willing to expend the effort to do so (but also recognized the significant investment of time and energy required); and

4. they saw the substantial likelihood of success from such a process (if it was carefully developed and implemented).

In general, they also concluded that the ethics of such change programs were subject to individual decisions. (The most interesting, and creative, example of this issue occurred when one group of three members presented the Professor with checks totaling $1,500.00 as a "down payment" for the receipt of their "A's" for the course, if he would agree to "cooperate" on their offer!) Overall, the students took a distinctively situational view of a boss's receptivity, suggesting strongly that their own propensity to influence assertively would necessarily be a product of their individual assessments of their current superior.

Implementation Comments

Based on the above experiment, it is likely that this exercise could be used in most small classes, could be administered on either an individual or group basis, and has little risk of failing to demonstrate the underlying points. Some students felt that more time (e.g., two weeks or more) would have helped them to plan and implement the task more effectively. The group papers were graded (in addition to the usual criteria of coherency, grammar, and professional appearance) on the basis of the creativity (yet practicality) of the influence attempts chosen (did they consider and implement more than a simple one?), the candor of their self-critique (did they truly understand and express why it may have failed to meet their expectations?), and the practicality of their recommendations for future implementation of efforts to influence their superiors. Overall, however, this paper represented only about 3% of their course grade.

The exercise took little time to prepare (once the questionnaire was developed), but the data tabulation took about three hours of clerical time. A side benefit was the additional student-professor interaction that was stimulated (at least for a week!) as a consequence of the assignment. Modifications that could be considered would to extend the duration (and associated significance) of the assignment for the entire academic term to provide enhanced opportunities for their preparation, implementation, and evaluation. Other ideas would be to conduct the project in phases (e.g., by having them submit an interim report on their intended influences strategies and their assessment of them against the six criteria before they could proceed), or even to have the groups exchange influence plans and critique them against the six criteria from their perspective. The idea of interim plans and feedback is a valuable one, since it would allow them to discover the possible fact that various individual's or group's strategies are in direct conflict with each other. Another issue raised (as in behavior modification) was whether or not the instructor should be told what the tactics were going to be, and what impact this might have on their success. Not doing so, however, runs •the added risk of making influence attempts that have not been assessed against the superior's own perception of his/her receptivity. A final (though perhaps complex) idea for future classroom use would be for the instructor to prepare and implement a concurrent set of influence strategies on the students so as to more vividly demonstrate the concept of reciprocal determinism!

APPENDIX 1
QUESTIONNAIRE #1

DIRECTIONS: Consider the possibility that employees could manage" (e.g.. constructively influence) their boss' behavior. This could be done by affecting their attitudes and values, educating them with new knowledge, or directly by changing their behavior. The purpose of this questionnaire Is to explore your thoughts regarding this process. Please answer the following questions by circling one of the numbers from 1-7 for each scale that best indicates your answer to each question.

1. How would you rate YOUR CURRENT ABILITY to manage (e.g., influence) the behavior of your future boss?

LOW MODEST HIGH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. What do you think is the general VALUE (or potential payoff) of efforts to manage the behavior of one's Supervisor?

LOW MODEST HIGH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. How WILLING are you to expend the effort to actively manage the behavior of you boss?

NOT VERY WILLING SOMEWHAT VERY WILLING

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. How PROBABLE is it that effective application of behavioral concepts could result in changed behavior of one's boss?

LOW PROBABILITY MODERATE HIGH PROBABILITY

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. From an ethical standpoint, how APPROPRIATE is it for employees to attempt to change their boss's behavior?

NOT VERY APPROPRIATE SOMEWHAT VERY APPROPRIATE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. How RECEPTIVE do you think bosses would be to employee attempts to change their boss' behavior?

UNRECEPTIVE NEUTRAL RECEPTIVE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

APPENDIX 2
QUESTIONNAIRE #2

DIRECTIONS: Read carefully each of the following suggested prescriptions for managing one's boss. Indicate, on a scale from 1-7 (e.g., 1=low, 4=moderate, and 7=high) your current WILLINGNESS to engage in each of these behaviors so as to manage your (future) boss's behavior.

1. When the opportunity arises to point out your own merits (e.g., praise yourself) in front of your boss, do so to assure that your assets and importance will not be overlooked. ____

2. Make your boss dependent on you by threatening to quit in the middle of a major project, or just before an important deadline. ____

3. Discover your boss' pet peeves, and don't do anything to irritate your boss on those issues. ____

4. Study your boss carefully to identify any personal weaknesses that you could later exploit for personal gain. ____

5. Actively interact with your boss in non-work (social) activities so that he/she will have a more comprehensive and total image of you. ____

6. Make your boss become highly reliant on your creativity and hard work by withholding significant items of information (e.g., key ideas; progress reports) from your boss until the last minute ____

7. Consult upwardly with your boss by asking for input, advice, and feedback so that your boss will feel useful. ____

8. If necessary, go over your boss's head and contact his/her manager to make sure that you receive personal attention/credit for the work that you do. ____

9. Be assertive with your boss by openly indicating your likes/dislikes, preferences, suggestions, and concerns. ____

10. Actively seek out, create, and accept opportunities to go golfing (or drinking, or out to dinner, etc.) with your boss. ____

11. Give your boss positive strokes whenever the opportunity arises so that you will be seen as THE source of his/her ego gratification. ____

12. Identify your boss's management style and consciously match your behaviors to it such that your boss will see how your talents are mutually complementary with his/hers. ____

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