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Foundations of Managerial Communication

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To two Arthurs,
my father and my brother

Preface

As a consultant in interpersonal relations to both the private and public sectors, I have been continually impressed with the sincere desire demonstrated by managers to improve their own communication skills. It is my experience that contemporary managers are vitally concerned with the human quotient of their work, and are willing to take time from a busy day to spend eight hours in a workshop to investigate it. In addition, managers I have worked with have expressed strong interest in obtaining more information than I could supply in a single workshop. To meet this need, I decided to write *Shoptalk,* a practical guide to communicating with one's subordinates, detailed enough for the practitioner, and explicit enough for the student.

I tried to make *Shoptalk* simple to read and consistent in format. Each chapter begins with an incident that sets the subject and the problem. Each incident, an abbreviated case history, is followed by questions. The reader knows when he begins a chapter what he can expect to learn as a result of having read it. In addition, a summary and questions at each chapter's end help the reader reinforce what he has learned. Throughout each chapter are further examples that clarify and elaborate major points. Finally, margin notes help the reader see at a glance the heart of important paragraphs, the bottom line.

The first two chapters are a historical, sociological, and psychological overview of the changing relationship between managers and their subordinates, and how communication is affected by that relationship. In order to understand the changes that currently affect managers, it is necessary to understand the changes that have affected them in the past.

Chapter Three deals with verbal communication, how the spoken message is heard in the organization. Chapter Four follows with nonverbal communication, an understanding of the vast array of unspoken messages to which managers must be attuned. Chapter Five is concerned with the context of management, the setting in which these verbal and nonverbal messages take place. Chapter Six introduces managers to specifics of facilitating a precise message between them and their subordinates through the use of certain listening and interactional skills.

Chapter Seven treats questioning as a separate entity. The differences between types of questions and indications for their use are examined. Chapters Eight and Nine are directed to the manager's facilitation of himself or herself, the former with clear thinking, and the latter with clear speaking. Chapter Ten explores telephone communication and the problems that are unique to that mode of interaction. Chapter Eleven deals with mediating conflict. Like Chapters Twelve and Thirteen, which follow, it combines learnings from previous chapters. Chapter Twelve examines decision making and creativity, especially as a result of group effort.

Chapter Thirteen explains those times when it is appropriate for managers to take the role of counselor, and Chapter Fourteen concludes the book with a practical look at improving one's written communication.

While many have been instrumental in helping me assemble this book, there are those to whom I wish to give special thanks. First, to my husband Don and sons Gary and Bob who acted as a sounding board; to Jack Neifert, my editor who gave support and encouragement; my workshop students, many of whom shared their experiences with me; to Dick Hodgetts whose invaluable suggestions gave the book its final shape; and finally to Eleanor E. Bergholz of Straher College, David Butt and William Damerst of Pennsylvania State University, Robert Janke of Virginia Commonwealth University, Jacqueline Lindauer of Anchorage, Alaska, Charles Smith of Widener College, and Doria Yeaman of Florida International University for their critical reviews and comments.

E. W. M.

Contents

Chapter One

Follow the Leader

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives reflect the content of each chapter. They will prepare the reader for what he can expect to learn as a result of having read the chapter. At the conclusion of this chapter the reader should be able to

1. Explain the biological and historical perspective that shaped the role of leader.
2. Define rank order.
3. Describe some of the ways rank order affects organizational behavior.

Leadership is what management is all about. It is a natural aspect of human behavior. How one behaves at his place of work, including what he says, how he says it, and who he says it to, is determined by his rank order. The following incident illustrates the subtle behavioral differences between leader and follower.

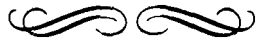
INCIDENT

An ice cream manufacturing company is one of 300 operating acquisitions of a highly decentralized parent company. The manager, Rod Thinnes, has been given almost total manufacturing and marketing authority, although strict financial controls, including a constant check, have remained the responsibility of the parent company. Thinnes and two of his top people, an accountant, Emory Wilson, and house counsel Lois Drew, meet with the president of the parent company, which acts as a central banker for its subsidiaries, to request needed cash.

Thinnes has submitted a request for a loan along with a five-year record of sales, earnings, return on net assets, and cash flow. He hopes not only to sew up a commitment for the loan but,

since it is company policy that if a subsidiary's record is good enough it may receive a loan interest free, to get that as well.

The president, Peter Sturgiss, stands and greets all three, shakes their hands, smiles, and offers them seats. While there are two sofas across the room that are at right angles, and three chairs on the other side of Sturgiss's desk, Thinnes, Wilson, and Drew choose seats on the sofas. Sturgiss goes behind his desk, leans back, folds his hands behind his head, swivels in his chair, and looks about while they begin to plead their case. While he is quite relaxed, their postures are alert and tense, and while his eye contact is averted from time to time, they keep their eyes at the ready, like marksmen aiming their guns. After some initial talk, Sturgiss says, "I have seen your figures, and they look good. It's people like you who understand the operation from the bottom up, the real world. It's why we kept you on, Rod. You're one of the best." Rod accepts this tribute with a quick look at the floor and a pass at his tie. He replies, "Thank you, Mr. Sturgiss. We appreciate your confidence. We feel that our numbers and our record are good enough to earn us the loan interest free." Sturgiss swivels to face Thinnes head on, sits still, narrows his eyes, is silent for a moment, and says, "You are cash users, but as long as you give us higher returns, we're here to help you." Thinnes leans forward on the sofa, sitting almost at its edge. "We appreciate that; it's one of the reasons the association between us has been so great. We do what we have to and know how to, and you're there to back us up. Mr. Sturgiss, we have consistently shown good margins and a return on net assets. . . ." Sturgiss interrupts, "We are not ready to commit. It looks good on the loan, but whether or not we can do it without interest requires a deeper look into your record." He sits on the edge of his chair, his hands both placed knuckles down on his desk. "I thank you for coming to see me. I much prefer a face to face visit to a telephone call. I'll want you to spend more time with our people here, share with them more information." He stands, they stand, and the meeting is over.



Incident Questions

The reader is not expected to be able to answer any of the incident questions before reading the text. Answers appear at the end of the chapter.

1. All members of this meeting displayed a certain kind of behavior. What was it?
2. How did Sturgiss display and maintain his authority?
3. How did Thinnes and his people display their lesser rank?
4. How did the role of leader in human systems come about?

Anyone who is a manager or who would like to be a manager wants to be a good one. In order to be really good, whether we are a chief executive, a factory foreman, a presiding bishop, or a football coach, we have to be skilled above all else in communicating to everyone we deal with in the course of our work, not only subordinates but superiors, peers, and outsiders as well.

This book will try to establish basic principles of interpersonal competence required of a manager. In order to do this, it helps to see how the role of leader fits into other human systems. It is a role that has been around a long time. It isn't even the sole property of man, but is shared by animals.

BIOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS

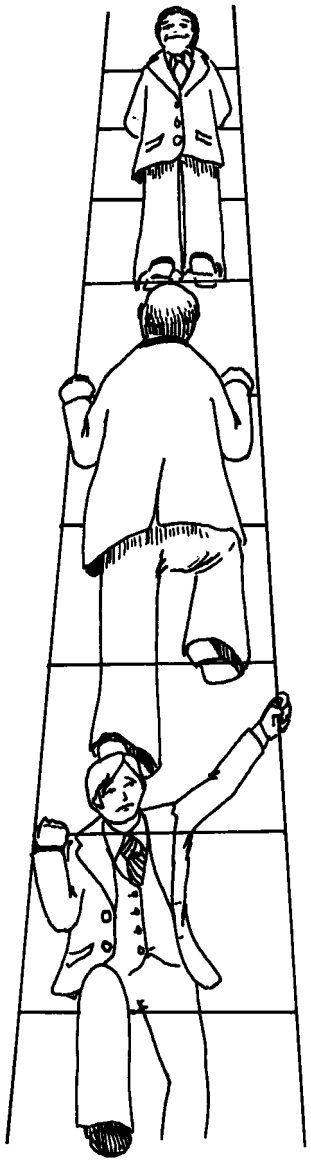
Most higher-order species divide their numbers among those who give and those who take orders. The presence of leadership seems to require some complexity in the organism. A biological lightweight like planaria, for example, a small marine creature lacking brain, sex, and rectum that has demonstrated an amazing capacity to learn despite its primitive brain, has no idea of leadership. One would be hard put to imagine what an organism with a head so expendable that it can regenerate itself in six days would need a leader for.[1] In some large-scale collective societies, such as those of minnows, bison, and certain flocks of birds, who, like Mahler's Eighth Symphony, can boast of a cast of thousands, there appears to be no leader. Large herds, flocks, or schools simply band together, feed together, drop their young together, get startled together, and flee together, operating as a single egalitarian unit.

Leadership requires organism complexity.

In other collective societies, such insects as bees, ants, and termites behave as if they were interchangeable parts, cellular elements of a single, larger organism. In these aggregates, rank order is not hierarchy but job designation, clearly marked and defined in a genetically programmed caste system. Their life work is determined at the moment of their conception. While certain human cultures are designed with clearly defined castes, these distinctions include ranking, which divides the social spoils. In all of these systems, the higher castes have privileges not shared by the lower. In insect colonies, caste is not a situation of privilege but of job specifications. Each member has a specific task, the status of which we interpret through human preference. In the human being the foot is not inferior to the eye. It has no more privilege. Its job is to move the body about and support its weight, just as the eye's job is to see and report. The termite queen has a specific job, that of producing fertilized eggs. We call her queen because she has all her wants supplied by others. She is fed and nourished and groomed by workers, and hers seems a job of high status. Actually, the queen gets to do very little except eat, mate, and produce young. She makes no unilateral decisions and is so massive that she must be turned and moved by the workers. She exercises no

choice but is obliged to stay confined and produce young. The workers call more shots than she, if one can consider a blind waiter-nursemaid a shot caller.

HIGHER VERTEBRATES



Rank order appears in higher vertebrates.

In higher vertebrates, the intellectual heavyweights of the animal world, there begins what is called ranking order. Like a ladder, the higher up you go, the better things are. Every member of the society knows which one is stronger and which one is weaker, and if there is uncertainty, there are testing procedures, functioning much like a baseball scorecard, that quickly establish the players. Chickens have a pecking order, not just domesticated barnyard chickens, but wild fowl as well. Each bird has a specific position in the chicken hierarchy, and all get to peck another level of chicken except the last, which gets to peck at nothing except a stray kernel of corn he spots with his walleyes. The last chicken may not resent his lowly position but may have rationalized that he is unworthy and therefore deserves to be pecked by other chickens. Every member of a nonchicken organization is aware of the pecking order within that organization. He knows who can say what to whom. He knows pretty much how far he can go in each direction, whom he can peck, and who can peck him.

RANK ORDER

The leader among most animal species that contain rank order is usually the one of the largest size. In certain societies, the leader is

both the strongest and the oldest, as, for example, among certain free-living baboons in which the band is led by a senate of several older males. High ranking order is not reserved for the male. Some species of deer delegate responsibility of the leadership of the herd to an aged female who no longer has the responsibility of her own young. In most animal species, however, it is the strongest, which usually means the largest, male. If there is any doubt, reasonable or otherwise, competing members test their physical strength by contest or simply by their ability to fake the other one out. Social control among those who rub the ground with their knuckles is a recognized male dominance hierarchy in which priority of food and resting places is the privilege of the top members. Baboon and macaque societies, for example, have effective status systems similar to social control mechanisms in human beings. In these societies high-ranking members are also privileged to make aggressive gestures from time to time to the others, meant to keep them literally in their places.[2] The gestures may be no more serious than a display of teeth or a full gathering of height, but they do the job. By the same token, the high-ranking members are the recipients of submissive gestures and deferring postures, such as when they and one of lesser rank arrive at the scene of food and the lesser one holds back, a move that clearly says to the one of rank, "You first." As we move higher up, the threats and appeasements become more subtle.

In most animal species, leadership is reserved for strongest male.

Within species that have rank order, there is always tension between those who are close in position. The tension diminishes as rank differential increases. It is as if the higher-ranking member understands that to engage in an encounter with someone so clearly beneath him and of so little threat would narrow the gap.

One of the major causes of tension is jockeying for position, sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious, but always the bid for the next rung up on the ladder. Most species have a series of reciprocals, sequential escalating actions, in which the contenders engage before there is any real bloodshed. Among primates, the one who disputes the other's authority may begin to test this authority by first staring a few seconds too long. The established leader cannot ignore this challenge. Human beings also respond to the stare as a challenge: "Something you don't like, Mac?" and Mac has to turn away or escalate the reciprocals with something like, "What's it to you?" His primate counterpart is offended by the unrelieved eye contact and reciprocates with bared teeth. If the initiator does not retract his stare, the challenged one will make a sound, a warning coming from somewhere back in his throat, very much like a ventriloquist. If the initiator does not then drop his eyes, but instead draws back his own lips to expose teeth, the gauntlet has been flung and the challenged one must respond with a more menacing reciprocal. It is his way of saying, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?" in a manner similar to barroom bravado, when the challenged downs the last sip and casually says to the challenger, "O.K., if that's the way you want it." The challenged primate then engages the initiator in combat; a bite

Tension exists between those in close position.

on the neck usually does it. Before this actual contact occurs, the initiator may have second thoughts and do a last-ditch reciprocal, his ace card. That is to swing around, bend over, and present his undefended rump, which the challenged one may mount in a casual manner that says, "I acknowledge your obeisance, but I'm really not into this." Presentation of the rump is a postural nolo contendere, a way of saying, "Don't hit me, boss."

HUMAN BEING RANK ORDER

The human being also has rank order. Every nation in every time and every culture has a system of ranking. Each culture decides what gets top priority, depending on the needs, institutions, and priorities of the culture. Status positions may be formal ones, called *ascribed positions.* These rankings have nothing to do with an individual's personal qualities. The person is simply born into them. Sex, the position of birth order within the family (whether first-born, middle, or last child in the family), the status of the family, and the status of child within the culture determine ascribed position. If a child is born into a society that values judges and eldest sons, and if he is the eldest son of a judge, his ascribed position is a high one.

Ascribed status position is determined by birth.

As we grow into adulthood, rankings include not just ascribed position but also *achieved position*, determined by what we have come to be. Whether we are short-order cooks, mayors, doctors, varsity fullbacks, or plant foremen, our achieved status is what we have been able to secure for ourselves. Our rights and obligations in any rank position, ascribed or achieved, are carefully spelled out. We know what is expected of us. We know what to expect from others. For example, when the foreman of a plant faces the president of the company, the differences in rank are quickly known. The foreman will usually defer, in ways not unlike the submissive deferments seen in primates. He will be less likely to speak first and will wait for the company president to proceed. Once discussion is begun, he will be less likely to interrupt, will lean forward, stand straight, and not come too close, and will be less likely to avert his eyes. When the foreman in turn faces his forklift operator, he will trade behaviors with the company president and his subordinate will behave toward him as he had behaved toward the president.

Achieved status is what we secure for ourselves.

Rank order, while established by *recognized position*, is also a subtle decision made among strangers. It is a decision made instantaneously. While we are invested in certain learned courtesies such as deferring to women and older persons, and while we acknowledge an informal first-come, first-served order arrangement that keeps long theater lines self-checked, who goes through the turnstile first and who gets the neck of the chicken are determined by subtle rankings. We usually defer to one of higher status. In any organization the top person leaves the elevator first, selects a chair first, selects the walking path that others follow, and doesn't get the neck of the chicken unless he or she insists.

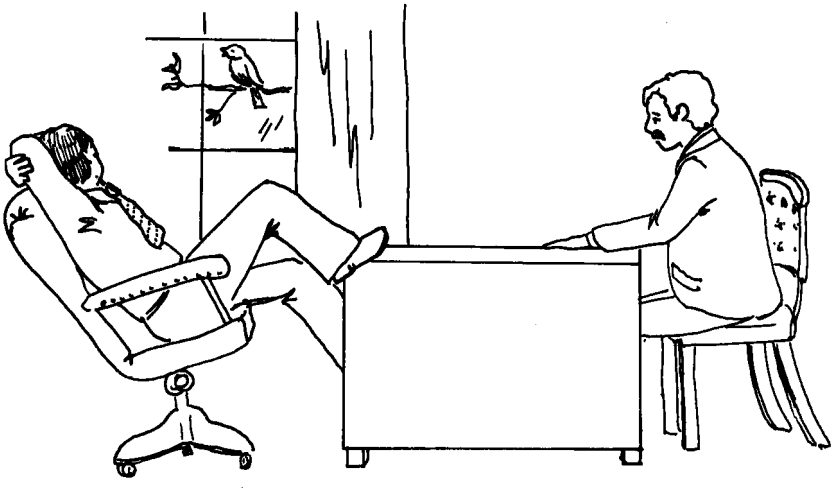
Behavior is affected by rank order.

RANK ORDER AND ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

People in organizations communicate rank by their nonverbal actions. For example, upper-level executives do less of the subtle cowering, bending, and crouching behavior done by their subordinates. The movements of organizational cowering are a slight bend to the head, a slight bend to the waist, or both, a courtly little dance made as if the bender were trying somehow to make himself smaller and less of a threat. It is reminiscent of the self-effacing behavior of many higher vertebrates when faced with another of higher status.

A high-status executive is more likely to engage in direct eye contact when speaking, one of the hallmarks of a powerful and persuasive speaker, yet, conversely, is more free to look elsewhere when spoken to by others of lesser status. When leaders initiate a conversation, lesser members of dyads or groups are attentive and responsive. They will sit in a posture of attention, leaning forward frequently with their eyes riveted on the leader. Leaders, in contrast, do not have to be overly responsive, and can listen while turning their heads away, looking in another direction, showing little reaction, and even reading their mail.

In conversation, leaders are more likely to interrupt, not bothering to wait for an opportune moment, but making their own, often doubling up on the other's words. Subordinates will seldom interrupt a higher-ranking person, even though they have no guarantee that their own remarks will receive the same attention. Leaders are less likely to smile and nod, movements of someone seeking approbation. In contrast, lesser-status members of dyads can be seen smiling more frequently and nodding their heads as if to punctuate the superior's discourse. They speak in a softer voice with more hesitations and qualifications. "Well, of course, it's only an opinion . . . " "It's probably just a stupid idea, but . . . ."



In groupings, the leader is usually the focus of attention. When others speak, they seek the leader's eyes and address the bulk of their remarks to the leader even when directing a point to someone else. Those of high status are more free to break away from groups. Their break is cleaner, made with ease, and executed with little clinging, which is more characteristic of the unsure leave taking of the subordinate.

Mehrabian enumerates many of the ways organizational behavior is determined by status.[3] He calls this a "power metaphor," the manner in which relative authority is conveyed nonverbally. The way one person approaches the office of another is expressed in this power metaphor. Whether we enter without knocking, knock briefly and then immediately enter, or knock and wait to be invited in depends upon our relationship with the person on the other side of the door. The seats we select are expressed in the power metaphor. When those of lesser status are in the office of one of higher status or in a board room or in a dining room, the lesser-status people are hesitant to sit in the closest seat if there is more than one chair; they will sit at a distance from the host and will approach closer only if the host indicates with a wave of a hand that it is all right for them to do so.

Those of lower status will initiate conversation and meetings less frequently than the one of higher status. The privilege of initiating belongs to the one of higher status. The foreman may invite the machinist, and the chairman may invite the junior executive, but it is seldom done the other way around.

Organizational rank is communicated by nonverbal behavior.

One of the most telling ways we demonstrate subtle arrogance is in our degree of relaxation. The one who is more relaxed in any encounter is usually the more powerful. Postural alertness is seen in one of lower status who has more to defend and more to be wary about. We can see small groupings, informal and formal, of those in an organizational hierarchy and, by the degree of body tenseness and alertness, determine relative status among the participants.

TRAPPINGS OF RANK ORDER

Whether ranking behavior is responsible for or the result of rank is a moot point. It is probably a little of both. Among the ancient Incas, education was directed by a simple policy. Leaders were educated in their responsibilities, and everyone else was taught how to follow the leaders. One of the basics of curriculum was probably how to spot a leader. In baboon societies, all the leader has to do is stand erect and his greater body size tells everyone that he is the boss. Because human leadership is built less on size and more on ability to plan, motivate, and innovate, leaders must have other trappings to distinguish their high station from the lower station of others.

Physical strength and bravery were revered among primitive man. When a hunter returned from the kill with a carcass slung over