

Power of management control and resistance



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The paper presents worker resistance and management control, in conditioning the organization of work and the 'manufacture' of worker consent. In the last decade, there has been increased interest in harmful or destructive behaviors in organizations. Much of this research focuses on resist behaviors of employees. (Bennett & Robinson, 2003) However, recently, research has examined destructive behaviors managers commit—specifically, abusive supervision (e. g. Tepper, 2000; Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004). In this article, we consider effects managerial power and control on employees' resistance. Researchers suggest that employees dealing with an abusive supervisor usually feel little or no control. As a result, individuals engage in behavior to restore personal autonomy (e. g., decrease organizational citizenship behaviors; Zellars et al., 2002). The structure of this resistance is explored in detail and the relationships between power, control and resistance.

In considering the relationship between managerial control, power and employee resistance, we found research on resistance and retaliation to be useful. This research suggests that interpersonal mistreatment (like abusive supervision) promotes retaliation and resistance displaced on other targets. For example, in their study on injustice and retaliation, Skarlicki and Folger (1997) found that conditions of multiple unfairness (distributive, procedural, and interactional) were associated with higher levels of organizational retaliatory behavior. Notably, these behaviors are characterized by both direct and displaced methods of retaliation (e. g., disobeyed supervisor's instructions, left a mess unnecessarily, spread rumors about coworkers). We suggest employees engage in resist behavior to retaliate directly against

their abusive supervisor, and they may also engage in displaced resist behavior. Moreover, people expect negative reciprocity beliefs to affect the relationship between abusive supervision and resistance.

They can contribute to more effective use of employees' tacit knowledge and, by making more flexible work organisation possible, improve productivity and quality (Guzzo et al., 1985). However, these benefits elude many companies.

The research literature abounds with examples of companies that have seen employee involvement efforts founder or deliver negligible benefits (Guzzo et al., 1985; Lawler, 1986; Cotton, 1993). Some writers (eg. Bushe, 1983; Hill, 1989) have suggested that negative management attitudes have been a significant barrier to the success of employee involvement initiatives in many organisations. This paper reviews evidence from a literature review carried out by the author for the Employment Department (Fenton-O'Creevy & Nicholson, 1994) on the power and control role played by managers in employee involvement initiatives. The paper also draws on this evidence to understand the underlying causes of management power and control to employee resistance and how it might be avoided.

Abusive Supervision

Although abusive supervision is a low base-rate phenomenon, it has notable effects on employee attitudes (Tepper, 2000). Research shows that abusive supervision is related to lower levels of satisfaction, commitment, and justice perceptions, and higher levels of turnover, role conflict, and psychological distress (Ashforth, 1997; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Tepper, 2000).

Interpersonal mistreatment is a central component of abusive supervision, and research indicates employees perceive supervisors as a dominant source of interpersonal mistreatment (Bies, 1999). Supervisors are reported to be the most prominent source of bullying at work (Neuman & Keashly, 2003). Indeed, both theoretical and empirical research suggests abusive supervision is related to retaliation. For example, Folger (1993) proposed that supervisors who fail to meet an acceptable standard of demeanor promote retaliation. Bies and Tripp (1998b) found that victims of abusive bosses directly undermined their bosses in private as well as openly ridiculed or challenged them. Fenton-O’Creevy & Nicholson, 1994 reported 31.4% of their respondents displayed resistance against a supervisor and felt justified doing so. Aquino, Tripp, and Bies (2006) demonstrated that lower level individuals are more likely to seek revenge than higher level individuals. Jones (2003) found that interactional injustice from an authority was significantly related to supervisor-directed retaliation. Further, a recent meta-analysis by Hershcovis et al. (2007) found that unfair supervisor treatment was a strong predictor of supervisor-targeted resistance.

In the workplace resistance literature, retaliation is conceptualized as an interpersonal form of resistance (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). By definition, retaliation involves deliberate actions against a perceived harmdoer. In the case of abusive supervision, these behaviors would be targeted against the supervisor (i. e., supervisor-directed resistance). Therefore, we believe abusive supervision will be associated with supervisor-directed resistance.

Employee Resistance

It has recently been noted in studies of corporate culture management and other normative controls that employee resistance is often not the grandiose and blatant acts we sometime picture when considering industrial conflict. In this context, resistance may assume more subjective forms such as cynicism, lampooning, humour and satire (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Rodriques and Collinson, 1995). The efficacy of these types of resistance is measured in terms of psychic effects and subjective recalcitrance rather than the traditional criteria of radical upheaval (see Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; de Certeau, 1984; Wray-Bliss, 2002).

Having said that, and as Fleming and Sewell (2002) and Ezzamel et al. (2001) have pointed out, the significance of resistance at the level of identity and selfhood cannot easily be untangled from the so-called 'material' issues of equity and well-being (also see Collinson, 1992). This is especially so when companies link subjective conformity to more concrete indicators such as the psychological contract, performance appraisals and the like. Cultural control in this organization is therefore not simply 'icing on the cake' but complexly co-extensive with the wage/effort bargain and this has implications for how one conceptualize resistance.

Resistance, Control and Power

As a type of ideological or discursive control that attempts to subjectively mould the identities of employees, it largely failed among these workers. An important empirical finding that may supplement other studies of control and domination is the character of this resistance. Employees perceive the

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culture and the supervisors who propagate it as patronizing and condescending. This is because being treated like children erodes their sense of dignity and self-respect. They therefore refuse to internalize this role by cynically disparaging the culture and forging a counter-identity vis-à-vis the membership scripts designed by the company. As Kondo (1990), Gabriel (1999) and Fleming and Sewell (2002) have pointed out, the agency imputed to many forms of resistance is misleading. Many of these types of subversion are pragmatic responses to immediate issues rather than acts based upon some long-term strategic political agenda, which is certainly not to discredit their efficacy or impact in this context.

The unpleasant side of paternalistic management, as employees experience and attempt to resist it, is missed in many studies exploring the subject. As demonstrated earlier, it is often portrayed as a control system that employees willingly embrace because of its nostalgic value (also see Sennett's (1998) overly nostalgic account of small workplace communities). In more management-focused literature, control is even recommended as a viable management style because of its affinities with harmony, consensus and cooperation. On a methodological note, any analysis of control and resistance should not automatically assume that if control fails to 'take' among employees it is due to resistance. Other factors may be involved in generating the behaviour that we attribute to dissent such as plain bad management. And the converse is also true. Just because there might be behavioural conformity within a paternalist system does not necessarily mean that workers have subjectively identified with it. For example, in his social history of 'labour quiescence' in the factories of Lancaster, Warde

(1992) criticized Burawoy's (1985) once popular notion 'factory regime' because the conformity prevalent among the Lancaster workforce could not be completely explained by their inculcation in a paternalistic ideology. Structural and economic dependence relating to the prevailing labour market and career paths, he argued, was also a key factor.

People in managerial positions face a variety of challenges, but perhaps the most difficult is the smooth and effective management of change. (Jerome, 1990 p. 300-302) Studies have repeatedly shown that there are successful patterns of change management. These studies suggest that change is necessary, continuous, and inevitable; does not have to be random or disorganized; and can be controlled. Traditionally, managers have operated under a control-dominated model rather than a participative model. Managers were tough, pragmatic, tolerated no nonsense, and concentrated on imperatives. Order and hard-nosed subservience to rank and authority were valued. Workers often were assumed to be, and were treated as if they were, uneducated, unskilled, and uncooperative. It was management by edict (Peters, 1988 p. 17-20).

The realities of today's work force contradict traditional management views and assumptions. The authority of managers is undermined as workers demand participation in the decision making processes of their organizations. In addition to new worker attitudes, today's managers are experiencing the shock effect and turmoil of massive changes in the economic, legal, and social environment: mergers, acquisitions, and other forms of capital restructuring; rising employee expectations; a blurring of traditional power distinctions; and exploding information technology. These

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powerful forces of change have reduced managers' power and security and upset their familiar ways of doing things.

Change is a constant challenge to management. For some managers, dealing with change is tortuous and results in frustration, pessimism, and bitterness toward the organization. This explains why change often has a detrimental effect on managers' morales as they are swept along by events over which they have no control. No wonder that some managers consistently and energetically resist change and warmly embrace constancy and the status quo. The negative attitudes of some managers toward change may derive from several potent factors. Two primary sources of resistance are (a) their perceived frustrations in understanding, inspiring, and getting along with the new breed of worker, and (b) their attitudes toward pervasive new technological changes in the workplace that impact products, equipment, or work methods. These sources of frustration are discussed in turn below (Peters, 1988 p. 17-20). As a rule, people are risk averse and will not gracefully accept change as the acceptable and attractive alternative to the status quo. They complain about it and subtly or overtly resent those changes imposed upon them. However, for organizations to remain competitive, they must have managers who can respond to new and changing conditions. They cannot afford to carry managers who are complacent, desire to protect the status quo, or who have pathological resistance to change.

Managerial adaptability is important because managers play such critical roles in organizations. They help to define authority and responsibility. They are in charge and are expected to effectively cope with the demands

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imposed upon them by their internal and external environment. They help to shape the organization's vision, align resources to match that vision, and strive to gain the commitment of workers. Competence in dealing with workers from different backgrounds is important for managers because most of the work done by them is accomplished through the efforts of others.

However, the manager's job has become more challenging in recent years due to the emergence of a "new" and very diverse set of workers who have preconceived notions of workplace roles, relationships, and authority. The diversity expresses itself in terms of sex, race and ethnicity, education, age, and skill level. The projected impact of the increasingly heterogeneous workforce is awesome. For example, it is estimated that by the year 2000 one out of three Americans will be nonwhite; 85 percent of the new entrants into the workforce will be members of minority groups, women, or immigrants; and that over one-third of Americans will be 65 or older (Sami, 1991 p. 24-32).

Companies that learn to manage diversity—those that recruit and hire women, minorities, and the aged and help them to fit in the workplace—will find it easier to attract skilled workers from and to sell products and services to these groups.

Managerial adaptation is important because the attitudes of today's workforce are very different from those of their predecessors of just a few work generations ago. They demand feedback, consensual decision making, flexibility, autonomy, and upward communication. They are willing to verbalize about workplace inequities and have different attitudes toward work and leisure. Also, they do not obey superiors unquestioningly (Patricia, 1999 p. 30-37). When confronted with these new worker styles and attitudes,

some managers refuse to modify their management approach. They cling to familiar practices, even when they have become obsolete and irrelevant. With an emotional investment in the traditional and nostalgic way of doing things (the “ good ole days”), these managers rigidly resist change and feel little excitement about the future. They won’t admit that management is a prospective (focused on tomorrow) concept and not a retrospective one (focused on yesterday). As a result, they feel threatened by changes in the workforce and other changes in the workplace environment, and often feel stress and tension when confronted with it. They weaken and burden themselves with a defense mechanism known as the denial strategy that usually results in dysfunctional managerial behavior (John, 1991 p. 910).

What assistance can organizations provide to managers to help them adjust to the new breed of employees? In answering this question, one begins with the premise that managers are made, not born. The management process can be taught. Since the failure of managerial adaptation can be so costly and have such disastrous consequences, organizations should help managers to understand the new genre of workers and other environmental pressures attendant to the management function (Uttal, 1991 p. 66-78).

Organizations should promote the concept that change is the handmaiden of opportunity. To grasp that opportunity, organizations should devise proactive strategies to meet the challenges and maintain their competitive edge. In any organization, transforming a manager’s way of thinking may require a change in the organization’s elusive and perhaps half-hid-den cultural values and norms. The culture existing within an organization is the foundation of what it does, what it perceives to be important, and how it conducts business

and makes things work. The culture influences employees' and managements' sense of responsibility as well as their activities and behavior toward others. Several organizations have found that the biggest hurdle to the effective adaptation of change is an inappropriate culture.

The increasing diversity of the workforce—particularly the influx of women, blacks, hispanics, and other minorities—may necessitate a re-evaluation of the organization's culture. If found deficient, the organization might have to undertake a costly and very time consuming modification of its culture as a result of the various attitudes and beliefs which the new participants bring with them. The modification could include the development of a culture or mission statement or the use of culture focus groups and human resources programs that favor those who espouse the new values. However, the benefits gained from culture modification could easily outweigh the cost. For example, about two-thirds of the executives surveyed in one study indicated that a change in culture of their organization enhanced teamwork, improved managerial understanding of organizational goals and needs, and intensified the focus on and the need for human resources training and development (William, 1992 p. 53-54).

What then lies at the roots of these problems? There are several issues:

Career Plateauing. Given the pyramidal nature of organisations, in the absence of organisational expansion, many managers find their upward career paths blocked. There is evidence (Scase & Goffee, 1989) that for some this leads to lowered job satisfaction and a withdrawal from psychological and emotional engagement with work.

Organisational De-layering. There is some evidence (e. g. Dopson & Stewart, 1990) that the role of the manager is not in such a sharp decline as many popular writings suggest. However, many ' organisations are restructuring to take out layers of management. This decreases job security, changes the nature of their work and intensifies the problems of career plateauing.

Decentralising. In many organisations moves to bring operations closer to the customer/client base have involved a shift from functional to product-based divisions, the creation of strategic business units and profit-centres, and out sourced functions (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1991). The effect of these changes is to erode the expert and hierarchical power base of the functional manager, and require increased interdisciplinary knowledge and general managerial skills for coordination and planning. For many managers the resultant less tightly bounded roles often lead to longer working hours (Kanter, 1989).

Intensification of the Competitive Environment. Dopson & Stewart (1990) found in their study of managers' roles that the majority had experienced an increase in environmental turbulence. In the last two decades markets for the products of UK firms have become increasingly competitive. Japanese firms have set new standards for productivity and there has been growing and major pressure from the growth of manufacturing in low wage economies. Increasing need for speed of response requires greater levels of integration and lateral coordination in the layers of organisations.

Entrepreneurship. Some writers (eg. Kanter, 1982; Burgelman, 1983) have focused on the developing role, in some organisations, of managers as

sources of innovation, and the conditions required to foster change.

managers have been exhorted to be the champions of innovation and change. There is also an increasing focus on the role manager's play as instigators of strategic policy as well as being the implementers. These developments require an increasingly broad view of organisational goals from managers and risk taking behaviour not traditionally associated with the management role.

Total Quality and Customer Care/Focus Programs. In the BIM survey of managers, Wheatley (1992) showed that a high proportion of managers see these programmes as having a major impact on their roles. A survey by Devlin & Partners (1989) found that many managers felt threatened by these initiatives.

Information Technology. The role of management has traditionally involved a large component of processing and communicating information (Drucker, 1988). One impact of the rise of information technology is increasingly to make this role redundant. Conversely, the rise of IT has also created new management roles in the operation of these information systems.

Supervisor and first line manager roles are also changing. An IRS survey (1990) of 40 large UK organisations found the majority of organisations had recently changed the supervisor position or expected to in the near future, in most cases to a more 'managerial' position. The extent to which these changes were supported by systematic training was highly variable. Studies by the IDS (IDS 1987, 1991) support these findings, noting many cases where the introduction of new technology reduces the need for close

supervision. In some companies studied, the introduction of team working meant a new emphasis on supervisors taking a facilitating rather than 'command and control' role. In other companies supervisors were being given greater responsibility for managing budgets. All the studies noted that for some supervisors, particularly those with long tenure, the demands of the new roles proved too demanding. Commonly these changes have been accompanied by reductions in supervisory numbers, or the removal altogether of supervisory or management layers.

Changes of this kind have clear implications for the training and selection of supervisors. It is no surprise that in some organisations supervisors and managers who have been accustomed to the more traditional role have found the transition difficult. There is no doubt that management and supervisor roles are changing on multiple dimensions. At the same time some popular management writing has suggested that the number and importance of managers is in dramatic decline. The evidence does not support this position (Dopson & Stewart, 1990; Henkoff, 1990). However, it does seem as if many organisations are operating with fewer managers and wider spans of control, and that the job demands of managerial work are changing quite radically in ways that undermine traditional authority and require new skills.

The new demands on managers are challenging. Flattened structures, new technology, and networked information systems, more complex and uncertain markets are eroding the two traditional power bases of management: legitimate authority based upon hierarchical position, and expert power based upon functional credentials. For managers who have

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spent much of their working life with one organisation, or who perceive themselves as lacking in authority, influence and discretion these developments are often a source of anxiety and seen as a threat to their individual interests.

Decision Effectiveness

In a high power distance organisation, the problem of communication gap between the superiors and the subordinates as discussed in the previous section tends to hamper the reaching of effective decisions (Mintzberg, 1993). Senior managers are always right even when they are wrong, and usually take it affront when contradicted (even correctly) by their juniors; and the best way for employees to survive is to say the expected thing (Prendergast, 1993). Managers who are surrounded by yes men are unable to benefit from the diverse perspectives, experience, and knowledge of their subordinates. Worse still, with stress on conformity, ideas are unlikely to be refined and improved through group discussion and debate.

Ethical Behaviour

Nasierowski and Mikula (1998) point out that work ethics is weak in a high power distance culture. Similarly, Kedia and Bhagat (1988) argue that it may be difficult to foster work ethics in a high power distance culture. In addition, people from high power distance cultures are more likely to view a questionable business practice more ethical than people from a low power distance culture (Cohen, Pant, and Sharp, 1996). In a high power distance culture, superiors do not have to justify their decisions to the members lower in hierarchy, which insulates them from being exposed or reprimanded for wrong doings (Khatri and Tsang, 2003). Hofstede's (1997) description of a <https://assignbuster.com/power-of-management-control-and-resistance/>

power distance culture suggests that, in a high power distance culture, the existing power structure and the established hierarchical order are less likely to subject to challenge. People in a high power distance culture live with institutionalised injustice and consider hierarchical order to be normal and even desirable and accept the inequalities of power.

Lambsdorff (1999) note that hierarchies play part in corruption. There is considerable dependence of subordinates on their superiors in a high power distance culture. This leaves sizeable room for corruption in the form of favouritism and nepotism, as decisions are not made on the basis of merit but favour and loyalty. Takyi-Asiedu (1993) found that, in a high power distance organisation, scandals involving people in authority are, almost always covered up as long as they remain in power' (pp. 92). These cover-ups are a result of subordinates' loyalty.

Avoiding Resistance to Employee Involvement

Kanter has developed her ideas of power and powerlessness in organisations further (Kanter, 1979, 1982, 1989). Perhaps the most important concept is what she has called ' the circulation of power'. Kanter suggests that to be effective, managers need access to three sources of organisational power: access to information; control over resources; and influence (particularly lateral influence, through a well-established peer network). Based on her studies of firms with ' excellent' records of successful innovation, Kanter (1982) recommends the following methods of fostering conditions in which managers can play an ' entrepreneurial' role.

Multiple Reporting Relationships and Overlapping Territories. These require managers to form their own ideas about appropriate action and to build support for their ideas by 'selling them' to affected parties.

Free Flow of Information. Maximises the chances of managers seeing new opportunities for the organisation and enables them to see a 'bigger picture'.

Multiple Centres of Power with a Degree of Budgetary Flexibility. This ensures that there are multiple opportunities for managers to get access to the resources they need to implement new ideas by enlisting support from people in the organisation who control these resources. A High Proportion of Managers with Loosely Defined Responsibilities or Ambiguous Assignments. These are the people most likely to be able to seize new or innovative opportunities for the organisation. Frequent and smooth cross functional contact with the emphasis on lateral relationships as the sources of resources and support—the emphasis here is on building peer support across functions for new ideas rather than just pushing them upwards.

A Reward System That Encourages Investment in People and Innovative Projects. The reward system must allow and encourage a degree of risk. If rewards are based only on short term performance, short term performance is all the organisation will get. Some studies have examined empirically the behaviour of managers and supervisors in successful employee involvement programmes (Manz & Sims, 1987; Courtright et al., 1989). This research suggests effective management skills and behaviours appropriate to employee involvement take time to develop. These skills need reinforcing

not only by training but by the reward and performance measurement systems and by behaviour of senior management.

The most consistent theme of the research evidence has been reviewed in this paper of management and supervisor resistance to the implementation of employee involvement. Without closer scrutiny might regard this conclusion as a damning indictment of managers and supervisors as the principal culprits for the failure of employee involvement in many organisations. However, resistance to employee involvement among managers and supervisors is not universal. Closer examination of reports of such resistance and its causes suggests that negative attitudes to the implementation of employee involvement among these groups are often symptoms of wider organisational failings rather than being the root problem.

In many of the organisations studied by the author, support for a more participative management style was patchy or inconsistent amongst senior managers. This led to cynicism and reluctance to take any risks in changing their own behaviour amongst employees and managers. In others it was clear that performance measurement and reward systems still continued to reinforce old patterns of behaviour. Only few organisations had paid serious attention to providing access to the resources, information and influence that their managers needed to successfully implement employee involvement initiatives. And for many organisations the levels of resource input into training and development for managers and supervisors were derisory.

If the wider organisation systems fail to support the goals of employee involvement, if managers and supervisors lack trust in the commitment of top management to these goals, if they are left to see employee involvement as a zero sum game in which they will be the losers, then they are likely to respond to the implicit organisational message that nothing has really changed, rather than to the rhetoric of organisational transformation.

Avoiding resistance to employee involvement from managers and supervisors then becomes a question of proper attention to aligning organisational systems and processes with the goals of employee involvement. Key systems include performance reward and measurement, career structures, vertical and lateral communication, resource and budget control, information systems and management development and training.

The implication of Kanter's work on 'the circulation of power' (1979, 1982, 1989) is that managers and supervisors should be the targets as well as the agents of employee involvement initiatives. Managers who experience the benefits of employee involvement first hand and see their own influence in the organisation increasing are more ready to empower their own subordinates. In their discussion of organisational change, Katz & Kahn (1978) note that 'Enduring systems are over determined, in that they have more than one mechanism to produce stability. For example they select personnel to fill role requirements, train them to fill specific roles and socialise them with sanctions and rewards...' (p. 714).

In this context, they point out, strategies to cause change, which act only on individuals or groups, often fail. The larger system nullifies local changes. '... Individual or group change applies only to specific points in organisational

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space and is likely to be vitiated by enduring systemic properties rather than to change them'. Particular sources of resistance to organisational change are likely to be: mutually reinforcing habits and behaviours of individuals and groups, specialist groups who see a threat to their expertise, groups who see a threat to the existing established power relationships, and groups who see a threat to their access to resources or rewards.

Conclusion

Power, as a way of controlling and consolidating the contemporary employment relationship, may indeed have many positive aspects, but an acknowledgement of worker resistance and dissonance will provide a more complex picture of how this brand of management influences the lives of the workforce. In light of the study, we should not take for granted workers' preference for more traditional forms of management like power. Indeed, there are legitimate reasons why ostensibly 'caring' management approaches might be resisted, contested or subverted. We expect that employees who perceive that their work performance is highly controlled by their supervisors will, as a result, feel that their supervisors' interpersonal treatment is unfair. In situations where individuals are subject to controlling supervision over work performance that they feel is inappropriate, a perception of injustice is likely to occur. The experience of being controlled probably causes individuals to feel that there is a lack of respect, dignity, sensitivity,