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The Dual Role of Managers as an Object and Subject of Influence

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Abstract: The paper examines the dual role of managers as both leaders and followers. It discusses an aspect of managers' work that is often underestimated: their activity as executors of decisions made by their superiors. The paper defines the term "inferior manager" and defends the thesis that managers can be both objects and subjects of influence. It presents the results of an international survey of 15 English and 49 Bulgarian managers, comparing their leadership-followership attitudes. The report discusses several hypotheses about the observed differences. It concludes that inferior managers must choose style alternatives that correspond to the peculiarities of managerial subordination and influence their superiors in a way that best satisfies the interests of the company. Based on this, the paper identifies three main groups of factors that determine inferior managers' direction of influence: inferior-related factors, superior-related factors, and situational factors. The paper proposes guidelines for future research.

Keywords: Inferior manager, Upward influence, Subject of influence, The superior, Object of influence, Subordinate, Followership

1. Introduction

Regardless of whether they are managers or regular performers, subordinates have the potential to influence their superiors. Experts have already reached a consensus on this issue. As early as the 1970s, Smith and Wakley (1992) considered three types of subordinates: constructive, destructive, and routine. According to them, only the routine subordinate "duly obeys orders and does not try to influence his boss or colleagues, but is much less common than many think." Gabarro and Cotter (1980) later wrote that effective managers "need to establish and manage relationships with everyone on whom they depend – and that includes the boss". They place superior-subordinate relationships at the core of organizational effectiveness. According to them, only bilateral, targeted actions to maintain these relations can provide better organizational performance.

Despite the existence of such concepts, Peter Drucker (1997) claims that management textbooks and courses abound with advice on how to manage subordinates, but few, if any, barely mention how to manage the boss. To many professionals, the possibility of a boss being managed by subordinates seems either too revolutionary or not serious enough. The reverse link "subordinate-superior" and in particular its heterogeneity is poorly studied, and the relevant problems remain downplayed and therefore unsolved. Subordinates need to be taken out of the framework of their assigned passive role, especially those with higher levels of emotional intelligence and the potential to influence positively the organizational climate and work (Solomon, 2020).

The improvement of subordinate-superior relationships can effectively combine the strong power and awareness of the leader with the specific knowledge and pragmatism of the

subordinate. This partnership has the potential to improve the results of their joint and individual efforts but requires the active engagement of both parties. A good example of active involvement could be a subordinate's behavior, which leads to increased motivation of the superior. It is most often assumed that the responsibility for motivation in the organization lies primarily with the leader, and the role of others in this regard is reduced to finding and building mechanisms for self-motivation. Usually out of sight is the opportunity of contact with highly motivated subordinates to lead to a synergistic effect, expressed in increased motivation on both sides. This opportunity becomes a reality when subordinates are also leaders and are well aware of the importance of motivation in achieving organizational goals.

Similar examples can be given for other activities related to the management function. The influence of subordinates can be decisive in solving problems and decision-making, managing change and conflict, improving teamwork, and using informal groups to optimize organizational performance. On this basis, Drucker's (1997) statement that "the management of the boss is the responsibility of the subordinate manager and the key – perhaps the most important! – to his or her effectiveness as a senior executive" sounds quite relevant.

In management theory and practice, an invariable element as an object of influence is subordinate. Accordingly, the manager is primarily considered a subject of influence directed at the immediate down-level employee. The interpretation of the manager as a subject of influence directed at the superior is necessitated mainly by the need to meet the new requirements of modern management. The development of subordinate behavior models responds to existing needs, increasingly realized and perceived by managers. Many of them are capable as leaders but incompetent as subordinates.

The paper aims to shed some light on this lesser-known side of managerial work by trying to answer the following questions: Are the managers ready to accept that they can (and sometimes should) influence the superior and what factors determine this influence?

2. Material and Method

The survey was conducted among 15 English and 49 Bulgarian managers during management training courses they attended. Participants from the UK were first-line managers from various industries, while Bulgarian participants were middle and lower-level managers from five garment companies (three large and two middle-sized). The UK participant demographics included: 11 (73.3%) females, with an average age of 29.15 (SD = 4.05) and 3.08 (SD = 4.89) average years of managerial experience. The BG participant demographics were as follows: 42 (85.7%) females, with an average age of 41.11 (SD = 9.26), and 15.83 (SD = 9.69) average years of managerial experience.

The subject of the study was individual beliefs, attitudes, and preferences that allow the prediction of managers' behavior (Ali and Schaup, 1992). Three conventional research tools were used to collect and process the information: a questionnaire, an interview, and content analysis. The questionnaire was completed by all 64 participants in the study. It was made up of twelve questions with two statements in each. Respondents had to assign a score from 0-10 to each statement to show how strongly they agree ("0" indicating strong disagreement and "10" – strong agreement). The points assigned for each pair had to total ten.

The first part of the questionnaire included 10 pairs of statements rated by the managers in regards to whether they preferred a Theory X or a Theory Y mode of thinking (a tool already used by Little, 2005, and Hunsaker, 2005). The gravity of the result to 0 testifies to the belief of the studied object that people are lazy and need constant control (Theory X assumptions). As the result approaches 100, the opposite view gradually prevails – that people see work as an opportunity to express themselves and take responsibility (Theory Y assumptions).

The second part consisted of two pairs of statements (Table 1). The first pair measured the psychological readiness of managers (whether they wish or not) to influence their superiors, while the second referred to their physical readiness (whether they assume they can). Due to a need for compatibility with the first part of the questionnaire, the scores were multiplied by 10.

Table 1: Readiness to influence the superior questionnaire

Statement	Score
(a) If you think the superior's decision is wrong, you look for a way to change it, because the responsibility for solving the problem is mutual.
(b) If you think that the superior's decision is wrong, you prefer not to interfere, because the responsibility for the decisions made lies with the superior. (10)
(c) My resources as a subordinate are not sufficient for me to influence my superior.
(d) Despite my limited resources as a subordinate, I can always find a way to influence my superior. (10)

Interviews were conducted with all Bulgarian managers. The opinions and positions expressed by the interviewees confirmed their answers to the questionnaire.

3. Theory

For a long time, leadership research has focused on leaders, neglecting followers. Leader-centric theories and approaches have emerged one after another. As a balancing response, at the end of the 20th century, follower-centric theories began to arise. Among them, Implicit Leadership Theories (Eden and Leviatan, 1975; Rush et al., 1977), the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen et al., 1982), and the Courageous Follower Concept (Chaleff, 1995) became popular. A common feature of all of them is that they recognize the role of the subordinate and the importance of superior-subordinate relations. According to Baird and Kram (1983), people who analyze and understand the needs of their bosses and subordinates, as well as their own needs, will be in a better position to take advantage of superior-subordinate relationships. Knowing the needs of others enables managers to exert interpersonal influence on them, both downward and (sometimes) upward.

Interpersonal influence is a critical element in most organizations (Ansari and Kapoor, 1987; Farmer et al., 1997). It is not surprising that most researchers consider downward influence as the basis of managerial activity (Deluga, 1990; Higgins et al., 2003; Seifert and Yukl, 2010). Thus, many studies focus on the role of the subordinate as an object of influence (Bass, 2008; McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2002; Cheng et al., 2004, etc.) and transfer the responsibility for managers' performance entirely to their superiors (Longenecker, 1991). Some attempts to view the subordinate as a subject of influence have been made (Ferris et al., 1994; Ehrhart and Klein, 2001), but they have not been widely acknowledged. Influencing higher-level managers in an upward direction has recently been recognized as an essential ingredient of managerial success (Singh, 1998). Upward influence is defined as the attempt "to influence someone higher in the formal hierarchy or authority in the organization" (Porter et al., 1983). The majority of these attempts are directed at immediate superiors (Kipnis et al., 1980) and aim to obtain assistance or resources from them (Yukl et al., 1995).

Managers can be both a subject and an object of influence (Downs and Conrad, 1982) because they belong to two teams: the team of superiors and the team of subordinates. This is true for all management levels (even CEOs have to report to a board of directors). Managers switch their roles all the time: they are bosses one moment and subordinates the next (Bhawuk and Ferris, 2000). Obviously, as bosses, managers are more distinguishable and interesting to most

observers. As Laurent (1978) puts it, "Every manager a subordinate" is probably less attractive as a slogan than the more glamorous Myers' (1970) book title "Every Employee a Manager."

This partly explains the limited attention that has been paid to managers' upward influence and the short supply of suggested upward influence tactics (e.g., Kipnis et al., 1980; Schriesheim and Hinkin, 1990). Another reason for the limited research on the role of managers as subordinates could be hidden in its contradictory and heterogeneous nature. The perception of their active role in the management process, at first glance, contradicts the understanding that subordinates (regardless of their position) are passive executors of decisions made by others. However, managers are not regular executors – they usually organize the implementation process and are responsible for the final results.

Downs and Conrad (1982) and Laurent (1978) are among the few who have found the manager as a subordinate both an object and a subject of influence. Neglect and underestimation of the issue are unjustified, not only from the point of view of organizational efficiency and effectiveness, but also from the point of view of the managers themselves: successful influence attempts are associated with increased earnings, rapid advancement, and improved confidence and encourage managers to become more active in trying to influence superiors (Case et al., 1988).

It is not yet clear to what extent managers are aware of and able to combine the two roles. The situation is further complicated by the fact that they are objects and subjects of influence for their superiors, but at the same time, they are also objects and subjects of influence for their subordinates. The importance of context for understanding managers and their influence has been a focus of prior research (Vecchio and Sissman, 1991; Johns, 2006). However, there is not enough data (at least to my knowledge) to determine whether psychological and physical managers are ready for such a "dual role challenge." The existing descriptions of the factors that affect the direction and strength of their influence are also incomplete. Some experts point out broader contextual factors (Siegall and Gardner, 2000), while others accentuate trust (Brower et al., 2009), leadership style (Epitropaki and Martin, 2013), followers' personality (Ehrhart and Klein, 2001; Liborius, 2014), and subordinate attitude in particular (Jung et al., 2009) or work style fit (Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2018).

This paper makes a modest attempt to systematize the existing views and to suggest a comprehensive perspective of the interaction of the factors that influence the style of the manager as an object and subject of influence.

4. Results and Discussion

All managers who participated in the survey were inferior managers – most of them were first-line managers, and a few were middle managers. For the purposes of this study, an inferior manager can be defined as any employee who performs managerial tasks and is responsible for the results of their work to a superior member or body. The exercise of power over other individuals is not a must (Mullins, 1993) – for example, in some companies, the public relations manager is the only member of that department. Some significant differences were obtained after processing the data (Figure 1).

In general, all respondents turned out to be adherents of Theory Y. This was much more clearly expressed by the UK managers, while Bulgarians showed a moderate bias (82 vs. 59). The UK inferior managers also manifested a relatively high readiness to influence the superior – their average score in the dimension of Psychological readiness was 68 (versus 44 of BG managers) and 63 (versus 47) in the dimension of Physical readiness. In other words, UK managers stated their strong belief that people are generally responsible and do not need to be controlled all the

time. Additionally, they announced greater willingness and potential to influence their superiors compared to their Bulgarian counterparts.

Figure 1: Survey Results



Source: Own Research

These differences can be interpreted in many ways, but two things need to be explicitly noted here. First, the relatively low trust of Bulgarian managers in people. This gives ground for a reasonable assumption that most of them have a feeble inclination for delegation in their work. At the same time, as subordinates, they face a similar attitude on the part of their superiors, which can find expression in reduced management effectiveness throughout the whole hierarchy. Second, Bulgarian managers do not think they have enough resources to influence a superior (47), but even if they had the necessary resources, they would hardly use them – they lack the desire to do so (44). Thus, some wrong decisions can be implemented with unpleasant consequences for the organization.

The general principles of subordination provide a favorable opportunity for inferior managers to see the world through the eyes of a subordinate and a superior simultaneously. Their dualistic position presupposes, if not equal, then at least a corresponding distribution of time, resources, and creativity. Moreover, the dual role allows inferior managers to use their experience as subordinates to increase their effectiveness as superiors and to apply their experience as superiors to increase their efficiency as subordinates.

In this respect, Bulgarian managers demonstrate low interest and a deficit of desire for self-improvement. Successful management and development of any business require not only knowledge but also adequate skills for working with people. For example, teamwork requires awareness and application of different behavioral patterns. Effective teamwork is possible only if subordinates freely express their opinions, participate in decision-making, and take responsibility. This is a recognition of the qualities of the subordinate (often called an associate) and testifies to the existence of a certain influence of the subordinate on the superior.

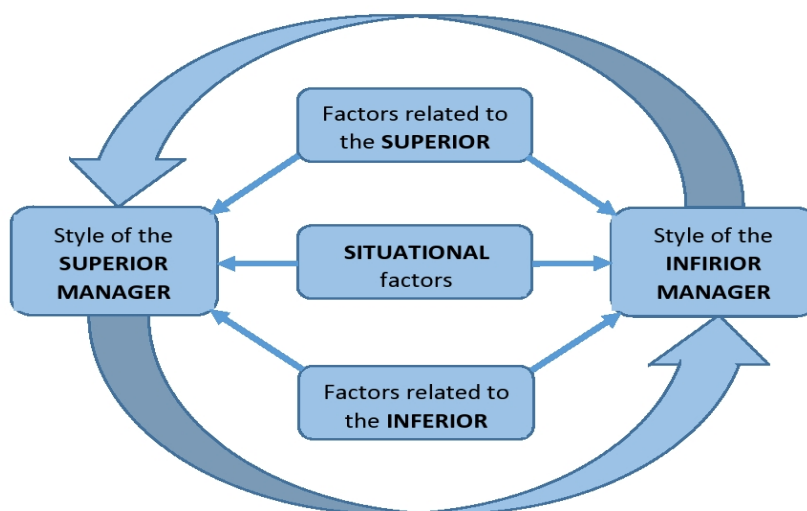
The specifics of the educational system in Bulgaria suggest a certain underestimation of the importance of skills and focus mainly on the acquisition of knowledge. In reality, however, even in the first years of their careers, management graduates need not only technical but also interpersonal skills. The lack of skills expected by the corporates can be crucial for youth professional development and future career. Skill shortages can complicate subordinate-superior relationships and make it almost impossible to apply the teamwork principle. As a result, a tendency appears to downplay the subordinate's role and overestimate the superior's.

The roots of this situation can be traced to the traditional notion of Bulgarian managers about subordinates' behavior. During totalitarian times, the purpose of subordinates was not only to cope with tasks and improve organizational performance but also to win the favor of the boss. Central to their arsenal of means to achieve it was servility. Inferior managers in state-owned enterprises (in fact, all enterprises were state-owned) had developed this quality perfectly, as their careers depended largely on the superior. Subsequent political and economic changes have imposed new requirements on managerial behavior. Constantly accepting the opinion and satisfying the desires of the superior is no longer enough to please them. Currently, private company owners need managers with fresh ideas and adequate skills to implement them. The comfortable subordinates from the past who have always taken the form that was convenient for the boss are no longer admired. Survey results indicate that many inferior managers still cannot throw away the old notions and find it difficult to perceive the concept of self-thinking and the need to influence superiors' decisions and actions.

To meet today's challenges, it is not enough for inferior managers to be physically and psychologically ready to influence a superior. They must be able to decide when and how to do so while keeping in mind their management responsibilities towards their subordinates. Present-day managers must be able to choose among the many style alternatives that correspond to both the interests of the company and the characteristics of managerial subordination in both directions – upwards and downwards. To do this, they need to be aware of the factors that affect their leadership and followership styles.

Since a lot has been written on leadership styles, here I prefer to focus on the style of the manager as a follower. Some analyses made in the field of leadership can serve as a starting point for reflection. For example, Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) distinguish three main groups of factors (they call them forces) that a manager should consider in deciding how to lead: forces in the manager, forces in the subordinates, and forces in the situation. A similar grouping can be done for the factors that influence the style of the inferior. The interrelationships of superior/inferior styles and the influencing factors are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Interrelationship of Superior/Inferior Styles



Source: Own Development

In terms of content, the factors that determine the style of the inferior manager do not fully correspond to the factors on which the style of the superior depends, but they are based on the same sources of influence: superior, inferior, and situation. The specificity of the combination

and interaction between the different groups of factors determines the degree of mutual influence between the superior and the inferior. There is rarely a balance – more often, the factors favor the influence of the leader, but the influence of the subordinate, although sometimes close to zero, always exists.

Of particular interest is the impact of these factors on the superior, mediated by the style of the inferior. The degree of this impact is equal to the magnitude of the influence that the style of the inferior manager can have on the style of the superior. To make the right decision on when and how to reduce or increase this influence, it is useful for the subordinate to know the factors from each group. A change in the intensity of any of them would lead to an immediate change in the degree of upward influence of the inferior's style. Ignoring or overestimating the impact of such changes runs the risk of inaccuracy in the decision to act.

Without claiming completeness, some significant factors grouped by sources of influence are shown in Table 2. The first column presents the factors deriving from the characteristics of the inferior manager, and the second and third include factors from external sources – the superior manager and situation. Knowing the impact direction and strength of these factors allows the inferior manager to participate proactively in the management process.

Table 2: Factors of Influence

Internal factors	External factors	
Related to the Inferior	Related to the Superior	Related to the Situation
1. Maturity 2. Proactivity 3. Self-confidence 4. Sociability 5. Position power 6. Independence 7. Awareness 8. Work interest	1. Leadership style 2. Knowledge in the inferior's professional field 3. Predictability 4. Expectations/perception of the inferior 5. Power resources 6. Extraversion	1. Organizational type 2. Company culture 3. Nature of the situation 4. Relationship (formal or informal) 5. Environmental issues

Source: Own Development

Inferior managers must consider the impact of internal and external factors both as leaders and as followers. As objects of influence on the part of their superiors, they are obliged to follow the principles of organizational subordination and perform assigned tasks in accordance with their job responsibilities. As objects of influence by their subordinates, they must recognize the tactics and techniques used on them, so they can neutralize them if necessary. Otherwise, they risk losing their objective assessment of the situation and their focus on organizational goals and interests. As subjects of influence, they are obliged to direct and control the work of their subordinates while not forgetting that they are also responsible for the quality of decisions made by their superiors. In this complex tangle of relationships, the style the inferior manager chooses to adopt in dealings with other agents is essential.

The choice of a particular style by an inferior manager should not be a consequence of fleeting creative inspirations, although this approach may be justified in an extreme situation requiring an extreme reaction. Instead, it should be based on a scientifically sound methodology. This means that intuition must give way to a more analytical interpretation of the situation among the arsenal of managerial tools. To assist inferior managers, followership decision-making models need to be developed, similar to the models that guide them in choosing a leadership style, that reflect as much as possible the overall influence of factors from all three groups.

5. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

The study explores the dual role of managers as leaders and followers. The results of an international survey of 15 English and 49 Bulgarian inferior managers are presented, and their leadership-followership attitudes are compared. The results show that UK managers state a stronger belief in people and their responsibility, while Bulgarians report a moderate bias. In addition, UK managers announce greater willingness and potential to influence their superiors compared to their Bulgarian counterparts. The report discusses several hypotheses about the observed cultural differences. It is concluded that inferior managers have to choose style alternatives that correspond to the peculiarities of the managerial subordination and influence the superior in a way that best satisfies the interests of the company. On this basis, three main groups of factors that determine inferior managers' direction of influence have been identified: inferior-related factors, superior-related factors, and situational factors.

The attempt to analyze the manager simultaneously as an object and as a subject of influence is a strength of this study. A positive feature is also the involvement and comparison of managers from different countries. However, the study is not without limitations. First, the limited number of participants makes it useless to apply statistical methods, which calls into question the reliability and validity of the study and does not allow the formulation of significant conclusions. Second, future studies should try to expand the list of factors that determine the degree of upward influence of the inferior manager and carefully examine the impact of each of them. Third, the survey mainly covers employees from lower management levels in garment companies. Perhaps future researchers will be interested in comparing the assumptions of inferior managers from different levels and industries.

Finally, the study did not cover the variety of aspects that describe the style of the manager as a subordinate. In comparison with the expansion of leadership concepts, followership theories are still under development, and followership style models have yet to be identified and explored. When do subordinate managers have to follow instructions, and when do they have to be proactive? When to trust and when to question the superior's decisions? What factors to consider to find the proper distance with a superior? These and many other challenging questions wait to be answered.

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