

**"THE JANUS HEAD: LEARNING FROM THE
SUPERIOR AND SUBORDINATE FACES OF
THE MANAGER'S JOB"**

by
Fernando BARTOLOME*
André LAURENT**

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* Fernando BARTOLOME, Bentley College, Waltham, MASS, USA

** Prof. André LAURENT, INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France

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Fernando Bartolomé and André Laurent

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamics of hierarchical relationships in organizations by focusing upon the dual role that managers play as superiors and as subordinates. After spelling out the contrasting perspective adopted by managers in upward and downward relationships, a learning dialogue between the two faces of the Janus Head is suggested as a way to improve managerial effectiveness.

THE JANUS HEAD:
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Most managers occupy a dual position in organizations: aside from interacting with peers, they are expected to act as bosses and as subordinates. This is one of the most tangible and obvious aspects of managerial reality. Hierarchical organizations would break down if managers were to deny this dual responsibility. Yet the Janus head manager is not a popular figure in management literature. Treatments of the downward looking face abound and numerous prescriptions have been offered to help managers in their leadership role. The upward looking face of the managerial subordinate has received significantly less attention. As for the dynamics of the dual role, the integration of both perspectives within a simple actor, it has been largely ignored.

Can managers draw on their experience as subordinates to develop more effectiveness as bosses? Can managers learn from their experience as bosses to become more enlightened subordinates? The purpose of this article is to promote a learning dialogue between the two faces of the Janus Head.

Let us first consider the case of Fred Blake, a district sales manager for Superior Chemicals, a specialty chemical manufacturer.

Fred Blake disagreed strongly with the sales targets that David Summers, the Regional Sales Manager, was going to ask him to achieve. He had heard from other district managers about the level of goals being set and felt that he should not accept the goals that he was sure David would try to impose on him. However, he was concerned that expressing his disagreement would be interpreted as lack of enthusiasm or laziness. He spent a great deal of time during the week preceding his scheduled meeting with his boss trying to figure out persuasive arguments and indirect, non-risky ways of convincing David to revise the sales objectives.

During the actual meeting Fred tried cautiously to persuade his boss. But in the course of the discussion he became keenly aware that David was getting upset and finally he accepted some unreasonable sales and profits targets. This was not the first time that Fred had experienced excessive pressure from his bosses at Superior Chemicals. But this time he felt that things were going too far and started looking for a job elsewhere - his only hesitation about leaving was based on his feeling that he would face the same problem elsewhere. He was nevertheless tired of the fact that no matter how well he had done the previous quarter, the pressure was always there to do better during the next. He knew that every time he got his sales team to do well he made his job

and theirs more difficult next time, and he felt very anxious about his forthcoming meeting with the salesmen when he would be obliged to sell them something he knew to be unfair.

At the sales meeting, the salesmen reacted angrily when Fred announced to them the sales targets for the next quarter and told them that these came from above and were non-negotiable. They felt that, once again, he had sacrificed them to advance his own career. At the end of the quarter, sales figures were found to be way below target. This precipitated a number of conflicts all the way up the organization.

The effects of this whole process were felt not only inside but also outside the company. A number of clients were upset about the strong-arm methods that some salesmen had used while trying to reach their sales targets during the last quarter.

Many managers have had experiences of this type. The unequal distribution of power in organizations often triggers behavior on the part of superiors and subordinates that are profoundly dysfunctional. The situation described above highlights some of the more common negative consequences of the hierarchical distribution of power in organizations.

Managerial subordinates spend considerable time and energy to find indirect ways of influencing their superiors. This is a

wasteful use of human resources and ingenuity.

- . When subordinates, out of fear, accept the unreasonable demands of their superiors, this may lead, in the short term, to good results accompanied by low morale and resentment, but in the long term, the consequences are likely to be high turn-over and low productivity.
- . Accepting unreasonable demands from their superiors leads managers to conflicts in their relationships with their own subordinates, and also to a loss of credibility and a decrease in their ability to influence them in the future.
- . A failure in the relationship between a manager and his boss is likely to produce a chain reaction of conflicts and bad feelings down the hierarchical line.
- . This, in turn, when results start to suffer, will eventually produce a chain reaction of conflicts in the upwards direction.
- . The negative effects of these processes are also likely to be felt outside the organization.

As hierarchical organizations seem to be here to stay, attempts should be made to improve their functioning. One way of doing this is to assess and understand their potential negative effects

and try to minimize or eliminate them.

As we saw in the case described above, these negative effects can be very costly and pervasive. How do they come about?

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

We were interested in understanding the dynamics of the superior-subordinate relationship among managers higher up in the organization. We were particularly interested in exploring the dynamics of subordinacy among these managers and how they cope with their dual role.

In order to do this, we designed two parallel questionnaires. One explores how managers think about relating to their subordinates and how they experience the emotional aspects of such relationships. The second one contains questions that mirror exactly those of the first questionnaire while focusing on how managers conceive their relationship with their bosses. The two questionnaires were respectively given to two independent groups of 50 senior managers participating in an executive development program at INSEAD, the international management school located in Fontainebleau, France. The two samples were carefully matched in terms of nationality, age, job, company and professional

experience.

What we report here is mostly based on the answers to two questions:

- . What are the things that you take into account when you have to choose how to relate to your superiors (subordinates)?
- . What are the most important things that you expect from your subordinates (superiors)?

A systematic comparison of the survey responses provided by managers as bosses and by managers as subordinates uncovered substantially different perspectives taken by each party. Such contrast was helpful to better understand the dynamics of hierarchical relationships and identify some of their negative effects.

THE MANAGERIAL SUBORDINATE'S PERSPECTIVE(*)

The subordinate's perspective differentiates itself most from the superior's point of view in three ways:

(*) As the surveyed sample was constituted by males only, the masculine form will be used throughout this article.

1. Subordinates spend a great deal of time and energy scrutinizing their bosses.
2. They are highly concerned with the extent to which they and their bosses are well matched.
3. They are more consciously concerned than their bosses are about satisfying their own needs through the relationship.

. Scrutinizing the Boss

Subordinates pay attention to what their bosses expect of them - what they are expected to do. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. They are even more concerned with anticipating and satisfying much more subtle expectations. They examine their superiors' personalities, their specific attitudes, wants and needs, how they like to work and how they expect their subordinates to work for them, how they may react to specific ideas or proposals, what their circumstances and emotional state are, the mood they are in, whether they are fresh or tired, whether they have had problems with their superiors or colleagues recently, etc.

. Measuring Match

Managers compare themselves with their bosses in multiple ways.

They examine their respective strengths and weaknesses, their comparative technical expertise, their work styles, their personalities, their ways of thinking, the extent to which they trust each other.

. Concern with their own needs

In deciding how to relate to their superiors managers are aware that their approach is influenced by their desire to satisfy their own needs, to advance in their careers, to be able to work the way they like to work, to be evaluated and treated fairly.

THE SUBORDINATE'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS

The observations described above allow us to make a number of inferences about the subordinates' psychological dynamics:

- . Managerial subordinates perceive their superiors as powerful figures and themselves as highly dependent on them.
- . They tend to underestimate their own power and their bosses' dependency on them.
- . They have reached the conclusion that there is very little they can do to influence their bosses directly, let alone to change

their bosses' behavior.

- . Yet managerial subordinates are striving to satisfy their own needs in this adverse context of power imbalance.
- . Their strategy becomes one of cautious adaptation, which they perceive as the only realistic route.
- . Adaptation to the boss requires some insight into what the boss wants, expects, likes, dislikes, prefers, feels... etc which leads the subordinate to engage into careful scrutiny of his superior's expectations, preferences and potential reactions.
- . Such assessment is conducted on a comparative mode whereby the subordinate constantly evaluates the degree of match between his boss and himself on a variety of dimensions.
- . The resulting subordinate adaptive behavior takes a variety of forms from avoiding to upset the superior's assumed expectations to explicitly attempting to please the boss.
- . Upward influence is exercised with great care. Upward information is carefully selected and subordinates filter away bad news and negative feedback.
- . The managerial subordinate's influence attempts are essentially of an indirect nature and seem to be extremely time-consuming.

THE SUPERIOR'S POINT OF VIEW

In comparison with the richness and the cognitive and affective complexity of the subordinate's perspective, the superior's point of view appears remarkably simple. The following patterns can summarize it in just a few words:

- Superiors pay little attention to individual differences among their subordinates.

- They are not consciously concerned with the extent of match between them and their subordinates.

- They tend to be unaware of how their own needs and preferences influence their behavior towards their subordinates. They see their own behavior as being mostly dictated by their jobs.

- They are mostly concerned with their subordinates' motivation, competence and ability to produce results.

The contrast between their orientation and that of their subordinates is striking. The two faces of the Janus Head seem to look for different things in different directions. This state of affairs may help to better understand some elements of the dysfunctional dynamics in hierarchical relationships.

DYSFUNCTIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE SUPERIOR - SUBORDINATE
RELATIONSHIP

The Consequences of bosses being subordinates first

We often tend to assume that, given his formal authority, the superior typically takes the initiative in determining what has to be done and how it should be done. And he may do so autocratically or in a most participative manner. But when we assume this, we fail to recognize the fact that the superior is himself a subordinate first. What he will ask his subordinates to achieve depends mostly on what he has previously agreed with his own superiors. Thus, the manager operates within the constraints of agreements previously made which often relate not only to objectives but also to ways of achieving them.

If the manager has accurate information from his subordinates and is able to strike a fair deal with his superiors, the subsequent process of leading his subordinates is likely to be relatively easy. But, if the manager fails to strike a fair deal - one that takes sufficiently into account his subordinates' personal characteristics, their needs, and to some extent their preferences - then a number of negative consequences are likely to follow.

The manager's subordinates may attempt to influence him and spend a great deal of time scrutinizing their superior and trying to

find safe ways of changing his mind. But what they fail to realize fully is that their superior is the prisoner of the agreement that, as a subordinate, he struck with his own superiors, and which he doesn't feel that he can afford to break.

Thus, while subordinates often complain about their superior's insensitivity, this, in most cases, is an inaccurate description of what is going on. The superior is aware of what he is doing and of his subordinates' potential reactions. His managerial behavior is largely due to the fact that he feels powerless in his relationship with his own boss.

Once an unfair agreement is established at a given level in the organization, a chain reaction of unfair agreements is likely to occur all the way down the hierarchy. The difficulty becomes that, in order to solve such problems, the corrective process has to go all the way up until it reaches the hierarchical level where the first initial unfair contract was made. This often means all the way to the top.

How frequent are such unfair contracts and abuses of power? We can only infer this from the responses of our sample. As a great majority of managers reported spending so much time and energy scrutinizing their bosses and finding indirect ways of influencing them, there seem to be indications that many of them - rightly or wrongly - feel that they are dealing with unfair and/or potentially dangerous bosses.

. Subordinacy and Feedback

Our research strongly suggests that managers as subordinates are extremely careful in expressing disagreement to their bosses or providing them with useful feedback about the dysfunctional aspects of their managerial styles. This understandable reluctance of subordinates to provide upward feedback produces several negative consequences. First, in the absence of feedback, the superior continues to exhibit dysfunctional behavior. Second, the superior who wants to know what's really going on has to spend considerable time and energy to discover what his subordinates really feel. Third, when subordinates experience feelings of resentment, their productivity suffers. Finally, subordinates often vent their own negative feelings on their own subordinates.

It is important to note that the unequal distribution of power means that, in most cases, negative effects flow first and most intensely from the top to the bottom of the organization. Only later may they rebound in the upwards direction, sometimes with seismic violence.

The innovation cemetery

"Intrapreneurship" for the last few years has been an important fad in the management literature. In order to promote it, some organizations created special structural arrangements to favor the expression and implementation of nonconventional ideas and

projects. This was tantamount to acknowledging that under the normal state of affairs people are unwilling to advance potentially productive ideas or that these ideas are often turned down by hierarchical superiors. But only a few years after these "intrapreneurial" experiments started, there are multiple reports that many organizations are stopping them. Apparently, they are unwilling to live with the disruptive effects of the presence of entrepreneurial islands within them. In other terms, order, stability, discipline, maintaining the status quo seem to be valued more than the potential contributions of deviant groups.

As long as organizations do not create enough safe channels for the expression of individual ideas and innovations to raise freely from below, or, in other words, as long as superiors do not learn to create a climate of trust that encourages subordinates to express such ideas, organizations will pay a high price for the utilization of hierarchical structures.

We have identified some important negative effects of hierarchy. What can be done to minimize them?

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

The two main causes of these problems seem to be the unequal distribution of power and the dynamics of the superior -

subordinate relationship. In our approach we are going to start from the assumption that the unequal distribution of power - albeit alterable - is here to stay and we will focus on ways to improve the dynamics of the superior-subordinate relationship given this state of affairs.

. A helpful fact: The Janus Head

Most managers have a Janus head. They occupy simultaneously the superior and the subordinate position. This means that at a psychological level they have direct experience of how it feels to be a superior and a subordinate. They have direct evidence to understand not only how superiors and subordinates act but also why they act as they do and what are the internal and external forces that shape their behavior. This information can be invaluable, provided that the manager is able to get in touch with it, understand it and put it to use.

. Where to start?

When two parties have unequal power, it is unrealistic to expect that the party with less power will take the initiative and assume the responsibility to structure and improve the relationship. The main responsibility remains with the person who holds more power. Therefore, we will start by examining what superiors can do.

. Managing downwards

Given the hierarchical structure of organizations, managers are subordinates first and bosses second. How easy or difficult it will be to manage subordinates depends a great deal on a managers' ability to manage his superiors.

The manager who is able to help his superiors make intelligent business decisions, set appropriate goals, provide adequate resources, establish appropriate control and performance appraisal systems, will find the job of managing his own subordinates much easier. Therefore, the first skill that an effective manager needs is the ability to manage his own boss. To this we will turn later in more detail.

There is much truth in the saying "trust flees authority". This means that any expectation of full transparency from subordinates, particularly with respect to their difficulties, problems, weaknesses or negative feelings toward their superiors is unrealistic.

The relevant question for the boss is what can I do to reduce the level of distrust and in the best cases to achieve as much trust as possible. To do this, it will be helpful for the boss to examine his own experience as a subordinate. He could ask himself who have been the bosses that I have trusted most and how did they behave towards me? Or, even more directly, what could my direct

boss do today to increase the extent to which I trust him?

By becoming aware of his own expectations and wishes as a subordinate, the superior will increase his chances of understanding his own subordinates. To say it in a paradoxical way: "to place yourself in your subordinates' shoes, understand how you feel when you are wearing your own subordinate-shoes". The superior who realizes that he is often less than fully honest in expressing disagreement or providing negative feedback to his own bosses may develop more realistic expectations about his subordinates' honesty.

Managers may then discover that to improve their relationships with their subordinates, they need to develop a number of skills: to pay attention to subtle cues that indicate the presence of problems, to learn to read between the lines and understand the true feelings of their subordinates, to create circumstances for more honest communication.

A hopeful fact is that, according to our research, managers do possess those skills. They use them abundantly in relating to their superiors. The problem is that many fail to apply those very same skills in relating to their subordinates. Paradoxically what bosses need to do is to apply their subordinacy skills to the leadership of their own subordinates.

. Managing Upwards

To improve their ability to exercise influence upwards, the first thing that managers can do is to draw on their own experience as bosses in order to understand better the behavior of their own superiors. Thus it is advisable for the manager to ask himself "what do I care most about in my relationship with my own subordinates?".

Our research indicates that bosses expect above all task performance. But they also expect loyalty, commitment, obedience, honesty and a sense of initiative. These expectations, as we saw before, may be unrealistic. But it is important for subordinates to understand that this is what their superiors consciously value.

Beyond this, the subordinate needs to be aware of other expectations that may be unconscious on the boss' part. Our data show that subordinates are extremely skillful at identifying these.

In fact the two main issues for a subordinate to establish a productive relationship with his boss are: to spend less time and energy scrutinizing his superior and to decrease excessive feelings of dependency on his boss through the development of empowerment from within. Achieving the latter will naturally bring the first.

THE SUBORDINATE'S SOURCES OF EMPOWERMENT

Feelings of empowerment come from three main sources: oneself, one's superiors, and others in and outside the organization. These three sources interact with each other.

. Self as a source of power

Some managers are extremely self confident, aware of their strengths, conscious of how dependent their bosses are on them. Others with similar skills or a similar track record, on the other hand, feel insecure, are unaware of their strengths and feel powerless in the face of their superiors. How managers feel toward themselves depends in part on how others act towards them; but it also depends strongly on their own perspective on themselves. Some managers are excessively critical of themselves. Others are too optimistic about their own qualities. What is needed is a realistic assessment of one's level of competence and power.

Our research indicates that most managers feel too dependent on their bosses and that they are not sufficiently aware of their own power in their relationship with their superiors.

. Superiors as Sources of Power

Superiors can make their subordinates feel more powerful by the way they behave toward them and more specifically by the amount of trust they demonstrate and the quality of recognition they offer.

Although this form of external empowerment can help, it can never substitute the process through which the individual empowers himself.

It is, however, important to note that it is not only one's direct superior that can be a source of power. Other superiors in the organization, including the direct boss' superior, are also important sources of power.

. Other parties as Sources of Power

For a manager, his own subordinates represent an essential source of power. Here we come full circle. A manager's ability to influence his subordinates depends on his ability to influence his boss, and his ability to influence his boss depends on his ability to influence his subordinates. The manager whose team produces and who has full support from his subordinates has a lot of real power over his superiors.

There are of course other significant sources of power such as the manager's peers, his reputation among colleagues in the industry

and other organizations, connections with important clients, professional groups, government agencies, etc.

. How can subordinates increase their power

The manager who wants to establish a more productive relationship with his bosses needs to use all means at his disposal to feel more powerful.

Under ideal circumstances, the manager should develop a substantial feeling of independence. Nothing will provide this as much as having a good set of demonstrated professional skills, a relevant network of relationships and excellent professional alternatives.

A crucial source of upward influence is the extent to which a manager possesses an expertise that is rare and critical to organizational success. Such individual in effect turns the power situation upside-down and will be much more able to influence his superiors and strike fair deals for him and his subordinates.

Self empowerment has its risks, however. Some superiors may feel threatened by powerful subordinates and punish them directly or indirectly, and it is impossible to protect oneself fully. One's feelings of competence, strength and power, may also make it difficult for an individual to allow himself to be influenced by his superiors or to accept direction when appropriate. Under

ideal circumstances, however, the manager should be aware of his own competence while recognizing the competence of others, to develop his own independence while being aware of his dependence on others.

Additional benefits of self-empowerment are:

- . a reduction of the excess of time and energy devoted to guessing and scrutinizing one's superior.
- . an increase in the subordinate's willingness to express clearly his own ideas and opinions and to directly check those of his superiors.
- . and an increased capacity to check directly and clarify his superiors' expectations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have examined some of the problems that the hierarchical organization presents. We have seen how they emanate from the unequal distribution of power and from the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of the superior-subordinate relationship.

What we are suggesting is that too many existing prescriptions to

deal with these problems are unrealistic or too partial. Most of them fail to recognize and take advantage of the fact that managers are both superiors and subordinates. Such situation places the manager in a privileged position. It should allow him to understand and manage better two sets of relationships that are crucial to his professional success, namely, those with his superiors and subordinates.

But to take advantage of their dual role, managers need to increase their understanding of their own feelings and behavior and to help the two sides of their managerial jobs talk to each other.

While we take the unequal distribution of power in organizations as a given, we believe that much can be gained from a better, more rational and flexible distribution of power. This may be facilitated by structural changes but it can be helped also by changes in the perspectives of the parties involved.

Effectiveness will increase when managers fully acknowledge that they are subordinates first and improve their subordinacy skills. Their performance will also be enhanced if they recognize more explicitly that their roles as superiors and subordinates are intricately and inseparably related.

Our advice to the manager-boss is to empower his subordinates and realize that in the long haul, this is the best way of empowering

himself. To the manager-subordinate we recommend taking responsibility for his self-empowerment as a fundamental instrument to manage his superiors.

This may seem to some a formula for chaos as it implies an increased transfer of power from superiors to subordinates while simultaneously reinforcing the subordinate's power from within. In fact while this rebalancing of power may alleviate some aspects of the dysfunctional dynamics described above, it still will take place within a hierarchical structure where the formal balance of power remains in the superior's favor.

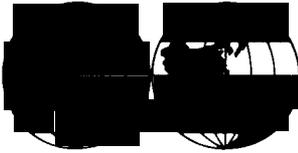
We would like to end this paper with an optimistic observation. In our experience, the best bosses, those who empower their subordinates most, are extremely self-confident. This self-confidence results in high levels of trust in their relationships with their subordinates and their superiors. Their special kind of non-arrogant self confidence seems to be at the root of their ability to trust and empower others.

Thus we conclude with the thought that good management starts home, i.e. it starts with the individual's ability to develop his own competence, self-confidence and power from within.

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CAMPUS INSEAD

Boulevard de Constance
77309 Fontainebleau Cedex, France
Telephone (1) 60 72 40 40
Telecopy (1) 60 72 40 49
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