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The Fight for the Alpha Position:
Channeling Status Competition in Organizations

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Abstract

A long-standing debate on incentive and reward schemes has taught us that employees are not motivated by money and resources alone. A fundamental emotional motivator is the seeking for status and recognition. Traditional conceptualizations of status-seeking behavior viewed it as a rational means by which to attain resources. The managerial implications were that by breaking the connection between status and resources—by making it clear that status would not lead to resources, managers could eliminate status-seeking behavior.

However, the new research suggests that status is emotionally sought as an end in itself. The quest for status is deeply embedded, pervasive and powerful. It cannot be repressed, as was previously suggested. Status competition can lead employees and managers to counterproductive behavior, such as suppressing others, withholding information, or wasting resources. But all is not lost, a conscientious management can also actively channel the status-seeking energy in positive directions, by manipulating the environment and the criteria and symbols of status within the organization. Rather than being a source of politicking and inter-group squabbles, the drive for status can be turned into a powerful motivator serving the interests of the group.

INTRODUCTION

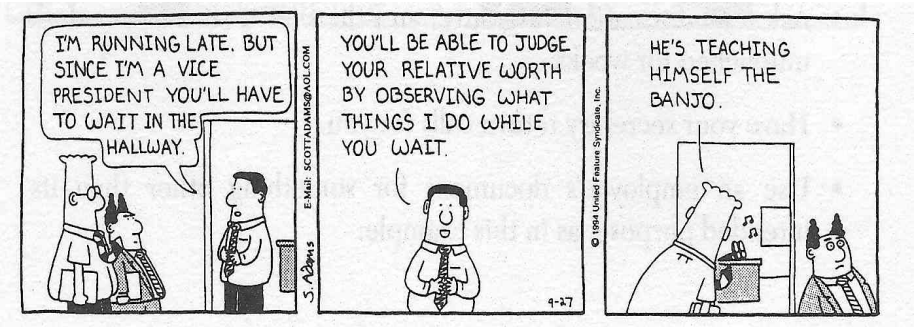
> *A man without material goods is hungry. But a man without self-esteem is mad.* (Jerome Barkow, 1975).

How can a firm motivate employees to do their best? A standard answer is "by performance-related pay." But disconcertingly, the empirical evidence that financial rewards raise performance is anything but clear. A debate about the merits of performance-based pay has raged over the last 75 years (Barkema and Gomez-Mejia 1998; for an example of the debate see: Gupta and Shaw 1998 vs. Kohn 1998), and many studies have shown that financial reward schemes usually fail to raise employee performance (e.g., Pearce 1987, Kohn 1993, Pfeffer 1998). The evidence against rewards schemes is so strong that we must conclude that standard incentive schemes miss something fundamental. For example, Gomez-Mejia and Wiseman (1997: 353f.) in their recent overview state that behavioral biases should be included in understanding the effects of executive pay. In this article, we argue that one fundamentally important behavioral bias is our deep-rooted drive for status.

Consider the following situation told to us by Ron, a Dutch manager of a pharmaceutical firm. Govert, an analyst working under Ron, seemed to be pre-occupied with status. When he saw that a bright young assistant analyst had been brought on board, Govert immediately began fighting for a title change. Not a salary increase or a sharing of workload; what he wanted was to be of clearly higher rank than the up-and-coming young analyst. When his request was declined he submitted his letter of resignation. Management backed down and gave him a higher title. Ron understood the status battle that was raging (at least inside Govert's head), "It was clear that the prestige implications were more important to him than material gains – the title change satisfied him although it was not accompanied by a salary increase."

Next was "the desk incident". A change of building led to Govert having a desk that was 10 cm shorter than the one he had had before. This was clearly beyond the pale; Govert was furious. "It was as if Govert's prestige could be measured in terms of his desk's

surface area." And whenever Govert felt his status threatened he browbeat those below him and became increasingly non-compliant with his peers and superiors. His focus on status brought down morale in the whole office, distracted management, and, perhaps worst of all, threatened to contaminate others to begin their own focus on status. This example will sound familiar to many managers – status striving is commonplace in organizations.



Activity	**Level of Humiliation**
Taking phone calls	Not so bad
Reading other things	Bad
Flossing	Very bad
Learning a foreign language	Very very bad

Source: Adams, The Dilbert Principle 1996, 34

Of course, the negative consequences of status games for a business can be greater than an undeserved promotion and less humorous than the Dilbert cartoon above. Indeed, status conflict can be very destructive – it may cause individuals to withhold information from one another, keep competing people or groups from listening to each other, or it may lead employees to channel their energy toward wasteful activities (such as striving for a higher headcount, controlling a bigger budget, or even getting a bigger office or a thicker carpet). A recent study in sociology found that corporate acquisitions tend to produce firms that are "too large" in terms of efficiency, because CEOs are motivated by the pursuit of status associated with presiding over a larger company (Hayward and Hambrick 1997). The drive for status may also prevent mergers – the recently attempted merger between Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham failed because the two CEOs could not decide who would get the top job (Personal conversations with Glaxo managers, Economist 1999).

The observation that we all strive for status poses several deeper questions, which we will attempt to answer in this article: What fundamentally drives human ambition and effort? Is status valued as a means that provides access to resources or rather as an "end in itself"? How is status seeking linked to the evolutionary history of our species? Can status criteria be influenced and changed? How is the status drive "implemented" in human beings? What are the managerial implications?

Developing a complete picture of the human drive for status with its sources, functions, symbols and consequences allows us to deduce important managerial implications of status seeking. The goal of this article is to explain status-striving as an omnipresent phenomenon in corporations which can be managed and channeled into a powerful motivator serving the goals of the organization.

THE NATURE OF STATUS STRIVING

> *Status, image, social class, politics, wealth, power, competition, rivalry, envy, greed, ostentation, impression management, boastfulness, display, pride, arrogance, hubris, pretension, importance, worth, respect, honor, self-esteem, reputation: our vocabulary gives us away. Human language is cluttered with terms that have relative standing at their core* (Jerome Barkow 1989).

Status drives human ambition and effort in multiple ways.

The classic assumption is that *status is rationally sought as a means to physical resources,* e.g., money, real estate, fashion goods, etc. If we believe that people are rationally self-interested resource maximizers, we must also believe that people pursue status only as a means to an end: high status gives us future opportunities to gain further resources. This is the predominant view in management, implicitly embedded in widely used evaluation and promotion systems. There is evidence supporting this view; for example, status may buy access to opportunities, to influential networks, or to career advances. But is this the full story? Or do people pursue status also as an end in itself?

An increasing amount of evidence coming out of the fields of Psychology, Sociology, and Biology now suggests that the purely rational approach is wrong on two fundamental counts. First, in addition to seeking status as a means to further ends (resources), status is also sought as an end in itself. Second, status seeking behavior is often not pursued rationally, but rather is motivated by powerful sub-conscious drives. The two views of status are summarized in Figure 1.

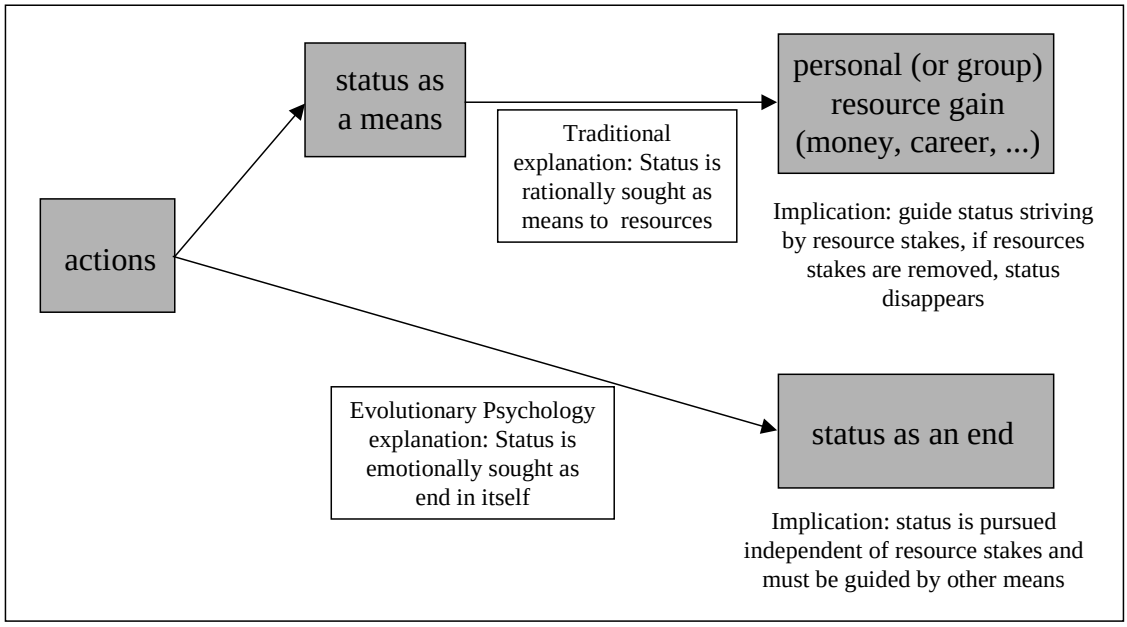


Figure 1: Two explanations of status seeking behavior

It is important to realize that these two views have very different managerial implications: if people see status as a means to resource acquisition, it can be guided and manipulated by rewarding resources for some behaviors and not for others. This is the central idea behind compensation schemes – people will adjust their status striving and behavior toward the resources at stake. However, if status is a valued resource in itself, it cannot be managed via incentives. It will arise "spontaneously" around criteria that have cultural and emotional appeal, but which may not be constructive for the organization, as in the case of Govert in our opening example.

We will now take a closer look at the nature of status seeking behavior; we'll provide evidence that status is indeed an end in itself, which is emotionally rather than rationally

driven. We will discuss the evolutionary roots of status seeking behavior, and the nature of status criteria and status symbols. Finally, we will discuss how an organization can effectively channel the status energy and keep it from having a destructive effect.

Status Is An End In Itself

Given the ubiquity and importance of status competition and status structures, it is not surprising that over the years sociologists have developed a number of explanations of the role and function of status structures. They have tended to emphasize status as a means to an end (Runciman 1998). For example, studies have shown that status can help a group function more efficiently by improving coordination, sharing responsibilities, and rewarding competence (Bales 1955, Blau 1964, Berger et al. 1977). At the same time, status represents competition, being used as a means to gain valuable resources via a better hierarchical position in society (Lin 1990).

However, solid evidence has accumulated recently that status is not only a means to an end, but also an emotionally driven end in itself. Evolutionary anthropologists have long recognized status competition as an ancient emotional driver in our species (e.g., Barkow 1975, de Waal 1989, Chapais 1991, de Waal 1996, Stevens and Price 1996). In the words of Robert Frank (1988), "feelings and emotions, apparently, are the proximate causes of most behaviors." We just have a strong emotional and biological drive to have higher status. Theories that treat status-seeking behavior as a rational endeavor fail to recognize the non-rational, emotional component of status and status-seeking behavior.

A recent study has shown in a systematic experiment that subjects were willing to trade real money for an ephemeral and short-lived status recognition that had no further benefits. This could be induced simply by encouraging group members to recognize (e.g. applaud) participants for the outcome of a certain behavior. Both in their behavior and in post-experiment comments the participants demonstrated that they were willing to give up money for the "nice feeling" of status (Huberman, Loch and Önçüler 1999). The roots of status desire and the forms it takes can be well explained by the evolutionary history of the human species.

Status and the Evolutionary History of Our Species

Our genetic structure puts basic constraints on the malleability of the human brain and the human mind. For example, sexual desire and sexual jealousy, familial loyalty, envy, and a host of other psychological traits are virtually universal among human beings and most social attempts to eliminate them have been unsuccessful. Such psychological phenomena seem simply to be bedrock attributes of human psychology.

Here is a stylized evolutionary explanation of status. In all species access to resources is critical to individual and group survival and reproductive success. In social animals (including nearly all primates) resources are often distributed, at least partially, through competition. If one individual fights the others off the carcass, it will eat better and, over the long term it will produce and provide for more offspring like itself—aggressively competitive—than will the less successively aggressive individuals. Through differential rates of survival and reproduction, over generations this type of behavior will become dominant in the group.

But if competition for resources is a lethal battle, then even the victor is likely to be injured (and therefore less likely to successfully gain resources later or reproduce). Moreover, victor and loser may have to cooperate soon after to respond to an external threat, such as an enemy attacking the group. Therefore, the group as a whole will not fare well if conflict gets out of hand. But if competition can stop well short of that, it can avoid the damage from open conflict. Determining which of two competing individuals would likely win the encounter, without actual fighting, leads to a status hierarchy that can be observed in virtually all primate groups (Barkow 1989, 181). For example, when there is competition for resources among chimps in a group (bananas or what have you), the chimps will assume positions to make themselves appear large, will bare their teeth, scream, and violently shake branches. A large size or a good show will intimidate the competitor. Memory among the competitors and others will mean that such displays are not required at every time a potential competition for resources arises. A semi-stable status hierarchy has been established – it takes effort to dislodge the alpha individual, but whenever someone else sees the chance, he will contest the rank order (see, e.g., de Waal 1989). Thus, there is a powerful evolutionary pressure for a drive for status and the drive

for status becomes pervasive through the species over time. Neither a strong chimp who too easily concedes defeat in competition nor a small chimp who picks too many fights will be having many offspring.

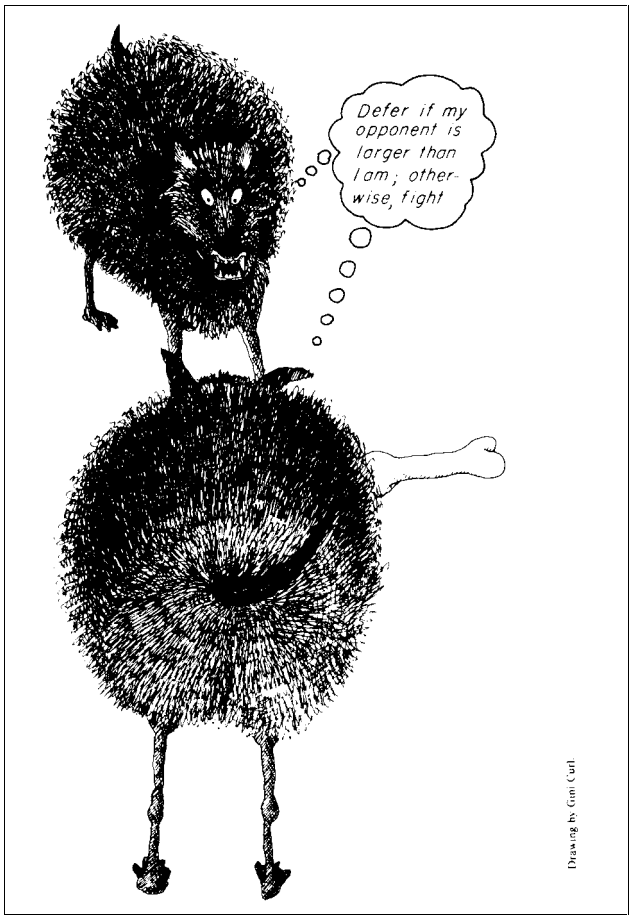


Figure 2: The "Algorithm" at the Source of Status Behavior (Source: Frank 1985, 123)

It is interesting to note that we can still recognize such "primitive" status biases in ourselves: studies have repeatedly shown that large, tall men tend to be listened to more, are conceded more respect, and have, on average, better career progress than short, small men (e.g., Cialdini 1993, 181 - 182). Moreover, tall men tend to have more reproductive success, that is, there is active selection for stature in male partners by women (Pawlowski *et al.* 2000). In this context, it is interesting to note that the taller of the two presidential candidates in the US has won 20 out of 23 times between 1900 and 1992 (Cialdini 1993), but claims that physical height was a causal factor are controversial (e.g., Economist 1996).

The Criteria and Symbols of Status are Flexible

Yet the *criteria* of status—the standards by which status is distributed within a group—in humans are not only tied to "brawn" or physical size (as they mostly are in primates). The fact that our species became (close to) monogamous led to an important role of what biologists call "sexual selection". As males know (albeit with some uncertainty) who their children are, they are willing to invest (emotional and physical) effort into bringing up and defending these children. A female, in turn, would be attracted not only to a male who is big and strong, but who is also willing and able to invest in the future of the children. That is, one partner is drawn not only to physical attractiveness in the other partner, but also to skills and control of resources. Note that this does not at all have to be conscious – it is simply that both men and women find it easy to like and to admire those who demonstrate greater ability or control resources (Barkow 1989, 188).

Once skill becomes important in terms of respect, prestige, and status, there is a need for diversity in status dimensions. Resources (and the ability to bring up offspring) may be acquired by being the best hunter, or butcher, or tracker, or maker of tools, or healer of wounds. Moreover, as our ancestors migrated widely within short periods of time (faster than genes could adapt), the criteria for status needed to be flexible to cultural and environmental shaping. As a result, status is so flexible that whatever a society "agrees" to reward counts: we still have the Schwarzeneggers, but singers, artists, doctors, lawyers, or almost anyone who can do something that others can't may be rewarded with respect and status. Even mathematicians may enjoy status! For example, Paul Erdös was seen as a freak by many, but because he was so good, he was greatly respected anyway.

Similarly, the *symbols* of status, the signs that indicate that one has it, are flexible and culturally determined. Think of the thickness of the carpet, size of the office, the size of the company car, the access to an "exclusive" club. This is culturally conditioned and only meaningful relative to others in the group. What does a billionaire need a second billion for? To be of higher rank than a fellow billionaire who only has a single billion (Barkow 1989). "Secret" restaurants have appeared in Silicon Valley over the last few years, who invite newly minted millionaires to a sheltered experience to which "normal" people do not have access, but the quality of the service is not really superior.

Another example is given by Germans who often view cars as the ultimate status symbol. In one company, managers could purchase company cars based on budgets corresponding to rank. There were three management ranks with corresponding car budgets, and the budgets were sized such that the "natural" car within a given budget range was a BMW 3-series (or Mercedes C class), a BMW 5-series (or Mercedes E class), and a BMW 7-series (or Mercedes S class), respectively. One junior manager was able to negotiate a deal with a car dealer that got him a 5-series within the lower budget. This was technically within the rules, but caused an outcry in the company. He was called into the office of the regional manager, who told him that he had recklessly violated the spirit of the policy. Subsequently, the rules were changed such that the stratification by model was made explicit (i.e., the lower level manager could *only* buy a 3-series or C class). In general, "conspicuous consumption" of luxury goods, purely for their role as a status signal, not their actual utility, is widespread as Robert Frank showed in his recent book "Luxury Fever" (1999).

As a final example of status symbols, consider the recent race between Jim Clark and Paul Allen to build the largest yacht in the world. This race echoed a similar status race among the Greek shipping magnates Onassis and Niarchos during the 1970s.

The Drive for Status is Hard-Wired into our Biology

Although status *criteria* and *symbols* are flexible and culturally determined, the status *drive* is hard-wired into us. The desire for status, like the desire for food, is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to suppress or ignore. (Doomed efforts freeing oneself from the drive for status sometimes have humorous results: "I don't seek status. I'm above that; I'm better than those status-driven folks!")

Various biological studies give us an inkling of how deeply embedded status is to our biology. Research shows that in some groups status is correlated to the number of children, and thus reproductive success (e.g., Alcock 1989: 535). Researchers have also found that higher serotonin levels are both a cause and an effect of higher status. They studied the relationship between serotonin levels and spontaneous changes in dominance

in male vervet monkeys. They manipulated relative status and found consistently that the blood concentration of serotonin was high in dominant animals, fell sharply when they ceased to be dominant or were isolated, and rose when they either became dominant once again or for the first time (McGuire and Raleigh 1985, 459-460). A similar effect has been observed in college fraternities: males in the highest fraternity leadership positions had the highest serotonin levels (Booth et al. 1989).

The combination of a status drive that is almost impossible to suppress with the flexibility of the status symbols has significant implications for the way managers should approach status issues in the workplace. We believe that the insights offered by evolutionary psychology provide managers with a greater understanding and a better toolset by which to eliminate harmful status competitions and channel the emotional energy inherent in status competition toward productive ends.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS OF STATUS SEEKING

Prior theories have advised managers to eliminate (rational) status seeking behavior by breaking the status-to-resources link. Since status is merely a means to resources, so the thinking went, eliminate the connection between status and resources, and you will eliminate status struggles. But if the numerous studies supporting evolutionary psychology are right, then this is a doomed approach. As human beings, we do pursue status in order to enhance their career and get access to resources, but we also pursue status as an end in itself. This has significant managerial implications. If the energy is there, we might as well use it.

Tap into the *Original* Incentive Scheme.

The drive for status is primordial, emotion-driven, and powerful. Tap into this wellspring of motivation (We call it the *Original* Incentive Scheme.) to maximize your employees' performance, rather than trying to fight it. Here is what that means.

Step 1. Recognize your company's informal incentive program.

You need to move beyond the formal incentive programs, to recognize and shape the informal incentives that exist within every company. What are the informal motivators in your company? A bigger office? Invitations to lunch with the CEO? A chance to work on high-profile projects? A company car? Travelling business or first-class?

Most managers fail to even recognize the existence of the informal incentive system running through their companies. And when they do recognize them, they dismiss the system because they don't like it. After all it isn't part of the formal system; it seems so irrational; it is a distraction from the goals of the organization, etc. This is the wrong approach. Status seeking is here to stay; it will outlive your company. Instead of ignoring or fighting the innate impulse to seek status, use it to your organization's advantage.

Step 2. Channel the status energy into a constructive direction.

Our innate need for status represents an *emotional energy* needing an outlet – if no status criteria exist, the group will create them spontaneously. This energy cannot simply be suppressed. Usually, it is more constructive to *channel* status seeking efforts toward the goals of the organization than to try to suppress or ignore them. Status can be manipulated in the criteria along which it is awarded, and along the symbols that express whether or not one possesses it.

Select and communicate the status *criteria*. Because of the flexibility of status criteria, it is possible to channel status energy toward productive ends. Identify present and pick future criteria by which status is attained. Make it clear that status will be awarded based only on what you want to encourage—be it collaboration, hard work, risk-taking, cost consciousness, innovation, *etc*. and not on politicking, doing favors, *etc*. Anthropologists have long shown that the criteria for status are flexible and open to cultural shaping, and recognition by a hierarchical superior is one way to lend weight to a status criterion. Specifically, individuals tend to value (and imitate) what high-status and powerful people do. This is why teenagers so easily imitate clothing, hairstyle, and speech of celebrities. In organizations, we do it too. If the office manager starts drinking tea in the morning

instead of coffee, many people switch to tea. If the head of the organization expresses that s/he values certain behavior and symbols, and acts upon it, people keenly observe it.

A word of warning: defining the criterion of status cannot be accomplished by lip service at the top executive level. Managers who announce principles of good behavior, only to turn around and play vicious politics among themselves, achieve only one thing: employees in the organization will become cynical, stop focusing on constructive work, and start playing the *real* game. Leading an organization to a merit-based culture requires self-discipline at the top, leading by example, holding people responsible for their behavior, and not cutting special deals. If the top management team can't keep this up, they may better not try to manipulate status behavior at all.

Shape the symbols of status (and save money). We are genetically driven to strive for status, not dollars. As we have discussed, the symbols of status are flexible, shaped by organizations and the society at large. If you can create non-monetary symbols of status within the organization, you will be able to get the benefits of status seeking without the high financial cost. For example, it has been well-documented that a handshake of the plant manager or CEO is a more powerful motivator in factory improvement programs than money (for example, see Loch et al. 2000).

Status channeled toward criteria of effort and performance can lead to what Frank (1985) calls the *positional treadmill*. Employees who care a lot about status may choose to work very hard on productive activities in order to enjoy a high status rank. They may want to do this even if they are intrinsically lazy – the status drive may overcome their distaste for work, and the overall productivity may soar. Frank (1985) demonstrates this effect in a conceptual model, but we can see examples of this happening in many organizations: teams of consultants who push themselves to the limit in an effort to impress their peers, or whole departments who discreetly "compete" in who stays longest in the office at night. If channeled well, status may propel an organization forward, but status can make an organization non-productive if the criteria are not aligned with good work behavior (Loch, Huberman & Stout 2000).

It is a liberating irony: Rather than fighting non-monetary status symbols, the sharp manager can put "negative" status symbols within the organization to good effect. In our example, Govert tied status to desk size. If desk size (or office location, grade of furniture, or some other "irrational" thing) has somehow become the criterion of status is your organization, use it! It is a cheaper incentive than a higher salary but with the same effect! Prior theories painted status competition as a threat to organizational goals; we see it as a powerful force that can be harnessed to great positive effect.

A few caveats are in order however. First, the organization does not exist in a vacuum and money is a common social symbol of status; therefore, you will not be able to ignore the quest for status-through-money entirely. A fair wage will be required. Nevertheless, the flexibility of status symbols is worth keeping in mind. Consider the following: In an experiment that we have performed repeatedly with managers in executive seminars, it took insignificant status symbols—we used gold stars or index cards reading "I'm #1"—to get participants to give up cash for these new, obviously ersatz symbols of status. Boxes of 200 gold stars go for about $1.50 – a very inexpensive incentive program.

Probably more sustainable symbols of status—since they are often recognized by society at large—that are still money-saving include job titles, a nice parking spot, thicker carpets, or a corner office. A Human Resources manager of a large German truck engine manufacturer frequently rewards highly productive employees of any rank or job (e.g. employees with an extraordinary contribution to the continuous improvement program) by lending them his company car, a brand new S-class Mercedes for the weekend, making sure that the employee publicly drives off in the car on Friday afternoon. The rewarded employees often go for spontaneous family visits, "leveraging" the temporary status symbols in their family context. The manager thus made productivity the criteria of status and the use of his car the status symbol. (Whether or not such an incentive would work in the less car-obsessed U.S. is an open question; managers must be sensitive to the cultural specificity of status markers.)

Second, symbols of status must be rare if they are going to carry any significance. Many times organizations hand out "status symbols" such as plaques and trophies freely. The

wrong-headed thinking is along the lines of "Plaques are inexpensive, so if they provide motivation, let's distribute them to everyone!" This approach fails to appreciate the notion that status is relative. If an ersatz symbol of status is easily acquired by anyone, it no longer is a status symbol because an effective status symbol, by definition, must provide a means by which to differentiate the have's from the have nots.

Moderate Political Status Behavior by Setting a Collaborative Environment

We hope it is clear that status seeking can be channeled toward positive ends. The status drive depends also on the environment – in certain circumstances, politicking and disruptive behavior is less likely than in others. By shaping the environmental context, managers can reign in excessive and/or non-productive status –seeking behavior

Limit inter-group status differences.

An individual can derive status not only from his/her own capabilities, power, or resource control, but also from membership in a prestigious group. Obviously, some groups defend status in order to secure access to resources (e.g., unions, or organizational factions vying for power). But again, status struggles between groups often persist even when no resources are at stake. Mutual disparagement between groups is all too common. In one car manufacturing company, for example, electrical engineers look down on mechanical engineers because "we work with tolerances of microns, and for these guys, a deviation of one millimeter is tight, haha!" Simultaneously, the mechanical engineers feel superior because "we make the car, these guys just make gadgets." As long as this remains friendly banter, it is, of course, benign. But often, such mutual feelings of superiority lead to communication and coordination breakdowns, which in turn cause rework costs and low quality results in projects.

It has long been known that groupings tend to arise spontaneously and cannot always be suppressed – research has shown how easily "in-groups" and "out-groups" appear (e.g., Tajfel 1970, Wang and Johnston 1995). The point is that status differences among groups tend to worsen identification with the own group and negative feelings toward the other group, cementing the group conflicts. This point has been stated clearly by

Winston Chen, the Chairman of Solectron Corporation, the world's largest contract manufacturing company. In speeches on manufacturing competitiveness, he used to ask listeners who in their company earned the highest salaries and enjoyed the most respect. Usually, the answer was not "manufacturing people" (but rather engineering, marketing, research, finance etc.). Chen then pointed out that it is no surprise that manufacturing employees are not listened to or involved since they earn lower salaries and are less respected than other parts of the organization; that goes a long way toward explaining a lamented lack in manufacturing performance.

As group status seeking arises spontaneously and worsens outgroup-rejection, managers must make an active effort to overcome it, for example, by job rotation and frequent between-group contact to break down barriers, but also by avoidance of differential access to organizational status symbols. This effort is necessary precisely because the status seeking is emotional and spontaneous; it occurs independent of (and in addition to) competition for resources.

Limit The Size of Peer Groups Competing For The Same Status Symbol.

Our research suggests that status competition increases in intensity as the relevant peer group grows (Loch, Huberman & Stout 2000). Any financial group reward is dissipated with the size of the group; yet status gains are always relative to a single individual. We all know examples of small companies accomplishing impressive feats, because every member feels responsible for the group output, makes an effort, and is appreciated for his/her contribution. Large organizations tend to lose the identification with the whole, which leads individuals to turn their attention to gaining a higher status than their office neighbors.

But even large companies can avoid this effect by keeping *peer groups*—the groups of people with whom people compare themselves and to whom they feel responsible—small.. Take the large consulting companies, for example, where employees work in small teams, where status rests on contribution to the common goal counts, and team members feel mutually accountable. From our evolutionary past, we humans are locally oriented toward peers with whom we are in frequent contact, not to large and anonymous

organizations. By keeping peer groups small, status competition can be kept in a local environment, which makes it easier to channel constructively.

Foster Solidarity.

Groups of our ancestors arose in striking a balance between collaboration against outside threats (e.g., hard to obtain food, or predators) and internal competition (resources, mates, and status). Researchers have observed systematically how monkey and ape groups grow larger as outside threats grow, suppressing internal competition (Dunbar 1996a). This behavior is not controlled by rational thought, but emotionally: the more threatened the group is, the more subdued are status desires, which allows the group to grow larger without conflicts becoming unmanageable (Dunbar 1996b,: 21, 35).

The same is true in today's organizations, who commonly use external threats to increase cohesiveness, collaboration and effort. Consumer goods companies regularly depict competitors as the "enemy" – Pepsi's "war cry" ("We hate Coke!") is famous; similarly, a large North American brewer showed video clips at annual sales meetings during the 1990s, where teams, each consisting of a marketing and a sales director (the usually squabbling departments!), dressed up in battle fatigues and blew up beer cases, delivery trucks, and even a factory of a rival brewer[1]. After the "ambush", they downed cans of their own beer together in celebration. There are other publicly known examples of such "solidarity against the enemy" campaigns in the airline industry (for example, British Air against Caledonian, and Virgin Atlantic against British Air). Solidarity causes status rivals to "bury their combat weapons," sometimes in rational calculation, but often also aided by a *feeling* of sympathy.

Condition: Become Aware.

Status hierarchies will never go untested or unproven for any extended period of time. Status struggles are part of ourselves as well as the fabric of our social systems. The status channeling program that we have outlined in this section cannot be effective until the *managers at the top of the organization admit to the drive for status in themselves* and

[1] In order to not let the "motivational effect" get out of hand, the movie clips clearly revealed that only "toy models" were really blown up, not real assets of the competitor.

are willing to control it. Not surprisingly, we can more easily see status seeking behavior in others than we can in ourselves. Ask yourself: Have you ever tasted bitter jealousy when a colleague received public praise, even though your own position was not affected? Have you ever argued against someone in a meeting only to not let that person "be right"? Have you ever ignored or suppressed outstanding work of a subordinate because you felt threatened by its quality? Have you ever hired a mediocre job candidate because a talented candidate might threaten you? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you must accept that you yourself may be contributing to counter-productive status competition.

In our introductory example, the manager stayed above the status fray until Govert bought a car that was nicer than the manager's. Suddenly, the manager was no longer paternalistically amused by Govert's status seeking antics; now Govert had really gone too far! While the manager was surely right about Govert, the manager had gotten sucked into the status competition vortex. From this point onward, he would be less capable in judging Govert's actions and impartially choosing a proper course of action.

The managerial implications and suggestions are summarized in the table below.

- Use informal status-based incentives toward positive ends:
  - Tap into the *Original* Incentive Scheme: Tune in to the symbols and criteria of status within your organization
  - Channel rather than fight status seeking behavior: Select status criteria, communicate desired behavior clearly, shape symbols of status, use the positional treadmill.
- Develop optimal environmental context
  - Limit group status differences
  - Limit size of peer group
  - Foster solidarity through "external threat"
- Become aware
  - Increase your awareness of status-seeking behavior in yourself as well as others.

Figure 3: **Summary of Managerial Implications**

CONCLUSION

Evolutionary psychology is increasingly coming to the fore of both psychology and social psychology. It provides a coherent and powerful framework and has received a great deal of confirmatory evidence. It provides a new way of understanding the nature of many psychological phenomena, including status seeking behavior.

We've seen how the theory suggests that status seeking is hard-wired into us and therefore ineradicable. The drive for status is based on emotions rather than rationality, and status is sought as an end in itself, rather than simply as a means to resources.

The managerial implications are profound. Prior theories have focused on the down-side of status seeking behavior which, as any manager can attest, is a force with tremendous destructive capacity, capable of diverting employee attention and energy toward turf battles, one-upmanship, and politics – and away from performance. These theories, treating status seeking as a rational attempt to gain resources, have recommended suppressing status seeking behavior by breaking the link between status and resources. It is increasingly clear that these attempts have been futile, and the theoretical basis for the recommendation, unsound.

Rather than fighting in vain against strong genetic pre-dispositions, we need to channel this energy, this primordial, ancient incentive mechanism, toward productive rather than destructive ends. Our theory is thus encouraging. Understood and harnessed, the innate striving for status can help spin the turbines of the organization.

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