

The Danger in Manipulating Employees

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By Mortimer R. Feinberg and Aaron Levenstein

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Describing the turning point in his own career, Lee Iacocca offers in his autobiography a triple-whammy illustration of manipulation in business. While a relatively unknown junior executive at Ford Motor Co., he was told one day by his mentors, Bob McNamara and Charlie Beecham, that Henry Ford wanted to see him.

They "had already told me they had sold Henry on the idea of making me head of the Ford division, but they asked me to play dumb. They knew that Henry would want to give me the impression that it was his idea."

Of course, he went along. It was in his interest to participate in his allies' manipulation of Henry Ford; in playing the game, he was being manipulated by his mentors, who were thus putting him in their debt; and finally, he was silently accepting his own manipulation by Mr. Ford.

This charade arouses little aversion. Nobody was really harmed, and no basic ethical boundaries were violated. But all too often executives' deceptions slip over the shadowy line that distinguishes the expedient from the immoral, or may be so perceived by peers and subordinates.

What defines truly manipulative behavior? Eugene Andrews, director of executive education at General Electric's Management Development Institute, says:

"Manipulation is a one-way street: You exact—you do not give anything, or what you give is phony, like stock rations you know won't be worth a damn. The manipulator uses as a lure something the individual doesn't really need, or creates false expectations. For example, he knows that the individual can't go anywhere, but he holds out bait in the form of a promotion that will never materialize."

Jerold C. Hoffberger, chairman of Diversified Resource Management Ltd., says that "manipulators always play with hidden agendas." A frequent example, he says, is using people against each other. Employees are transformed into conduits for the transmission of unfavorable information about their peers.

A number of managers spoke bitterly of manipulators who consistently downgrade colleagues or subordinates by putting them in embarrassing situations. Out of the blue, in public, a question of detail will be flung at the hapless victim who cannot possibly provide an answer off the cuff. This type of manipulator often withholds necessary information from his colleagues in order to make them look bad.

We have heard many variants of this situation: the manipulator induces some of his peers to advance a proposal he thinks may possibly arouse the disapproval of higher management. If it meets with approval, he jumps in and takes credit as the author; if not, he remains silent and lets his colleagues rack up the demerits.

Harold Geneen, former chief executive officer of ITT, considers this kind of "office politicking" a cardinal sin. "If anyone tries to line up other managers to back his pet project in return for a quid pro quo later," he wrote, "or if anyone tries to force a man junior to him to give anything other than his honest opinion, he does so in peril of losing his job."

Charles D. Clark, president of Life Technologies Inc., notes that the manipulator usually keeps his own motives secret. He rarely explains his objectives. His questions are formulated like those of a cross-examining lawyer: On the surface, he is looking for information, but his real purpose is to find ammunition.

The most overt form of manipulation, of course, is the use of threats, actual or implied. Executives who operate in this manner often do so not only because they are interested in achieving an immediate objective

but because they have an inherent need to display their power.

James H. Wesley Jr., president of DKM Broadcasting Corp., emphasizes the pressure generated by the manipulator. He tries to wear you down, thinking you will want to trade off your discomfort in order to end his unrelenting attack.

Managers who reject manipulation as a tool of the trade do not necessarily abandon their responsibility to exercise power. It is not manipulative to create conditions from which desired results are bound to follow. For instance, installing a time clock to ensure punctuality is not manipulation, because there is nothing devious or deceptive about the intention. On the other hand, to pretend that orders are falling off and thus justify the closing of a plant would be deceitful and manipulative.

Nor should a resort to strategy necessarily be confused with manipulation. There are times when the parties are admittedly adversaries. Two chess masters facing each other across the board are not manipulators but strategists—that is, they are frank about their basic objective. So long as they carry out their confrontation with due respect for the rules of the game, they are not manipulators.

Here are some of the rules that the motivator observes and the manipulator tends to violate:

- **Rely on arguments and reasons that you yourself believe.** Unfortunately the manipulator, knowing his behavior is devious, finds it easy to rationalize. He covers his ethical nakedness by reassuring himself that, despite the odds, things will somehow turn out for the best. For example, in forcing a subordinate to uproot his family and move to a new location, the manipulator convinces himself (but not his subordinate) that "after a year he won't mind it any more."

Or the deception is justified "as a white lie that will avoid hard feelings." Often it's a self-serving effort to avoid confrontation when open disagreement would be the healthier approach. One seasoned executive claims that this tendency is found among younger managers who think it's the easiest way out. "They believe their manipulation will go undetected, but it's usually as obvious as a fire siren at three in the morning."

- **Whenever possible, give people options, not orders.** Even though you retain authority to determine the ultimate result, subordinates are entitled to be heard on matters that affect their well-being. The manipulator is recognizable from his practice of rushing others into quick decisions; the motivator allows an opportunity to think things through. This involves presenting a frank picture of all the relevant facts.
- **Respect confidences.** The temptation to violate confidentiality is often great. Being privy to what lies hidden in somebody's closet gives power over that person, as blackmailers well know. But to yield to the temptation is always unethical and usually self-defeating. It will cut off the flow of information every executive needs to make sound decisions and will undermine the trust of peers and subordinates.
- **Think in terms of building permanent relationships.** This requires looking beyond the immediate situation and understanding your personal style in relationships with others. Do you consider other people inanimate objects, tools that exist solely for the accomplishment of your objectives? Or do you recognize that they are entitled to have purposes and needs of their own?

The manager who uses the latter as a basic premise needs few other guidelines in distinguishing motivation from manipulation.

Mr. Feinberg is chairman of BFS Psychological Associates, a New York consulting firm. Mr. Levenstein is professor emeritus at Baruch College.

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