

Attributing Upward Influence Attempts in Organizations

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ABSTRACT. We examined the attributional processes involved in the success and failure of upward influence tactics and hypothesized that the success or failure of such tactics that affect the self-esteem and self-perception of the subordinate should be attributed to a ego-defensive bias. Male executives ($N = 260$) from four different organizations in India responded to a questionnaire containing items on influence tactics and the causes of their success or failure. A stepwise multiple regression analysis revealed that the success or failure of reasoning as a tactic was due to a defensiveness bias; success of personalized help and ingratiation had a more factual attribution. The results showing failure for the tactics of defiance and for conditional cooperation and confrontation, however, were mixed and need further explication.

BECAUSE THE INFLUENCE subordinates have over superiors (i.e., upward influence) has been found to be an essential ingredient of overall leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 1981), it is now being considered a relevant topic for research in organizational psychology (Ansari, 1989; Porte; Allen, & Angle, 1981). The decision to employ a particular tactic to influence the boss has implications for the success or failure of current and subsequent influence attempts, and the consequences of attempts depend not only on success or failure but also on the reason for success or failure (Litman-Adizes, Fontaine, & Raven, 1978).

In the present study, we examined the motivational bias for positive or negative outcomes in terms of success/failure of upward influence at-

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tempts. We assumed that motivational bias operates when the outcomes are value laden, and that the extent to which success or failure is considered positive or negative determines the causal attribution for that event. Thus, the outcomes of different influence tactics should differ according to their value to the attributer. For example, the success or failure of reasoning should serve the self-esteem and self-perception purposes for the attributer, and the attribution for success or failure on these tactics should follow a defensiveness bias. Other influence tactics that are relatively less value laden should approximate the factual model of attribution.

Method

Male executives ($N = 260$) in low and middle positions representing four different manufacturing organizations (located in northern India) voluntarily participated in the study. A majority (70%) were in the age range of 26 to 40 years; 80% had held positions with the same organization for 5 to 10 years; and about 67% had been in their present assignments for 2 to 5 years.

The executives responded to a questionnaire containing items on influence tactics and the causes of their success or failure. They were assured complete anonymity of their individual responses. Twenty-five items were used to measure the following five influence tactics: (a) reasoning (giving reasons, using logic, etc.); (b) personalized help and ingratiation (doing personal favors, using words that make the superior feel good, etc.); (c) conditional cooperation and confrontation (offering an exchange of favor, blocking, appealing to higher ups, challenging, etc.); (d) defiance (showing disagreement, opposing, etc.); and (e) coalition (gaining cooperation from coworkers). The respondents were asked to describe on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*) the frequency with which they had used each item to influence their immediate superior at work during the past 6 months. The five tactics have been found to be factorially independent, with sufficient reliability and construct validity (Kapoor, 1987).

The following seven causes of success or failure were taken from Schilit and Locke (1982): (a) favorable or unfavorable hierarchical position; (b) favorable or unfavorable interpersonal relationship with superior; (c) favorable or unfavorable support of members of the organization; (d) favorable or unfavorable content of the influence attempt; (e) competence or lack of competence; (f) open-mindedness or close-mindedness of the superior; and (g) the manner in which the influence attempt was presented. The respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (1 = *to almost no extent*; 5 = *to a very great extent*) the extent to which each cause was responsible for their success or failure. Thus, each respondent gave two ratings—one for success and one for failure situations.

Results

To test for the patterns of relationship between influence tactics and attribution of influence attempts, two sets of stepwise multiple regression analyses—one for causes of success and the other for causes of failure—were performed. Reported below are the significant findings in terms of the particular combination of influence tactics that best predicted each cause of success and failure.

The successful use of the reasoning tactic was attributed to favorable hierarchical position ($\beta = .15$, $R = .24$), whereas failure of tactics like defiance ($\beta = .17$), conditional cooperation and confrontation ($\beta = .19$), and reasoning ($\beta = .19$) was attributed to unfavorable hierarchical position ($R = .37$). The success of personalized help and ingratiation ($\beta = .15$, $R = .20$) and the failure of defiance ($\beta = .15$, $R = .17$) were attributed, respectively, to favorable and unfavorable interpersonal relations. The success of personalized help and ingratiation ($\beta = .15$, $R = .17$) or the failure of reasoning tactics ($\beta = .15$, $R = .17$), was attributed to favorable or unfavorable support of the members. Favorable or unfavorable content of the influence attempt was perceived as a cause for the success or failure of tactics such as conditional cooperation and confrontation ($\beta = .16$, $R = .17$).

The success of the reasoning tactic was significantly attributed to both self-competence ($\beta = .22$, $R = .20$), and the favorable manner of presentation ($\beta = .24$, $R = .22$). The two causes did not relate significantly to the failure of any influence tactics. Finally, the failure of influence tactics like reasoning ($\beta = .15$, $R = .17$), and defiance ($\beta = .16$) was attributed to the close-mindedness of the superior ($R = .24$). The analysis did not reveal the attribution of success or failure of the coalition tactic in terms of the causes mentioned.

Discussion

Results of the attribution process of success or failure, using reasoning strategy as a prototype, in general provided evidence for the defensiveness rule. If rationality is, in fact, the order of the society, then being reasonable surely enhances self-esteem. The subordinates in this case tended to attribute success to the self (one's own competence and the content of the influence attempt) and failure to external factors (close-mindedness of the superior) because an individual wishes to be perceived by the self (Bem, 1972) and by others in positive terms which, in turn, maintain his or her self-esteem. Such attributions serve ego-defensive purposes.

Apart from reasoning, no other tactic revealed the attribution for both success and failure. Whereas success on personalized help and ingratiation did show attributional dynamics, failure did not. The results also showed that the attribution of success using the strategy of personalized help and ingratiation contributed to better interpersonal relations and to the support of members. It seems plausible to presume, therefore, that attributions follow a realistic model; the attribution of only success with this strategy is probably a reflection of the dominant features of Indian organizations.

Personalized relationships have been found to be extremely powerful (Sinha, 1980), and ingratiation has also been shown to be used often by subordinates (Pandey, 1988). Hence, it can be assumed that the strategy most often meets with success in Indian organizations, although a congruent attribution for the failure of personalized help and ingratiation would have provided corroborative evidence. The fact that subordinates attributed their success to the content of the influence attempt is evidence of defensiveness. These two findings are in line with the hypothesis. A research implication is that the attributional processes provide a significantly fruitful dimension in which to study the actual influence processes at work.

The results on defiance and conditional cooperation and confrontation showed attributional dynamics only for failure. The findings were mixed, however. Failure on defiance was attributed to poor interpersonal relations with the immediate superior. In general, attribution of failure to external factors supported the defensiveness hypothesis. At the same time, poor interpersonal relations can be a cause not only for failure on defiance but also for the use of defiance to influence the supervisor. Consequently, it is difficult to deduce whether the attribution is a self-serving motivational bias or is an outcome of a rational realistic scheme.

The failure on conditional cooperation and confrontation was attributed both to personal (content of the influence attempt) and impersonal (hierarchical position) factors. The very fact that failure was attributed to the self flouts the motivational bias hypothesis. Although these results do not provide full support to the hypothesis, it is clear that different influence tactics follow different attributional dynamics, but this could also be a result of the valence attached to the tactic.

One dramatic result was the maximum use of hierarchical position as an explanation for success or failure in general. Whereas favorable hierarchical position was perceived as a cause of success on reasoning, unfavorable hierarchical position was perceived as a cause of failure on reasoning, defiance, and conditional cooperation and confrontation. In a way, hierarchical position defines the role of superior and subordinate and has different connotations for each of them. Blaming one's lower job status for the failure of an influence tactic seems to be the easiest way out for subordinates.

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