Attracting Superiors Through Informal Exchanges

Arti Shankar & Mahfooz A. Ansari

Exchanges between two individuals in any social relationship (especially in the organizational context) depend upon the distribution of power among them. The exchange involves the low-power person trying to increase the goodness of his/her outcomes through an increase in his/her power. There are numerous ways (bases of power) by which a low-power person can increase such outcomes (e.g., through connections with important people or by possession of some important information). However, there are several instances in which one feels the need to wield power over another but is unable to do so because he/she does not have a base of power to fall back on. This is often the case when the individual is newly recruited to an organization at a lower level in the hierarchy and does not have expertise and connections with important others, and thus does not have the basis to give rewards or punishments. In such instances, one can get one's way with superiors, subordinates, and co-workers by attracting them toward oneself through informal exchanges. It seems almost paradoxical that powerlessness can become a basis for legitimate power. Nevertheless, the actor can manage this by attraction oriented interpersonal exchanges. Such attraction oriented interpersonal exchanges are relatively risk-free in the Indian society and can be used quite successfully, since the intent behind attraction management is kept hidden from the target. We have empirically identified some five types of such exchanges (Shankar, 1992; Shankar, Ansari, & Saxena, 1993).They are listed in order of their frequency of usage in Indian work organizations.

Arti Shankar is a doctoral student and Mahfooz A. Ansari is a Professor of Psychology in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Kanpur 208 016, India.

Target Gratification

This is the most frequently used tactic of gaining attraction for manipulative purposes in Indian organizations. It involves gratification of the target in two ways. The first is by giving a positive evaluation of the target while interacting with him/her so that the target's esteem of himself/herself is enhanced. This is most effective if one exaggerates the actual positive qualities of the target and at the same time ignores negative attributes of the target. The second way by which the target can be gratified is by conforming or pretending to conform to the opinions of the target. It is made more effective if the actor expresses agreement with attitudes or beliefs about which the target person is a bit uncertain. Further, the actor can probably enhance the credibility of his/her agreement on a particular issue by tactically expressing occasional disagreement on unimportant issues.

The tactic has been found to be most effective in those instances in which the actor is authoritarian. Moreover, the probability of success of the tactic is most if the supervisors are themselves authoritarian or they act like benevolent fathers. This tactic ensures in countering the excessive control exercised by supervisors, especially so in private organizations by non-technical workers.

Enhancement-of Self

This is the second most frequently used tactic and involves direct verbal description of one's positive attributes before a target in order to increase his/her attractiveness for the target. This tactic is likely to be effective if (a) the actor presents himself/herself in terms of the idiosyncratic preferences of the target person and also if (b) the actor might present himself/herself as possessing traits that are generally valued in the culture. The former requires good intuitive skills, whereas the latter requires accurate social knowledge.

The tactic can be used under those circumstances where the user is himself/herself authoritarian and the supervisors have nurturant-task orientation. This tactic, too, can be used to counter the control exercised by the superiors. Further, it is used more effectively in private organizations,

Disparagement of Self

This tactic follows the enhancement of self tactic in order of its frequency of usage. It involves the actor presenting his/her weaknesses and, thus, overplaying the superiority of the target person. By using such a tactic, the ingratiator reduces the chances of being perceived as a competitive threat to the target person. This is especially relevant in a resource limited, hierarchical society like India. Care, however, should be taken while using this tactic to self deprecate on unimportant issues, or this tactic might just backfire.

The effectiveness of this tactic is most if both the actors and the supervisors act in a nurturant-task-oriented manner. This tactic like the previously mentioned ones is effective in countering the excessive control exercised by the supervisors on the actor, especially so if the organization is one in the private sector.

Instrumental Dependency

This is the next most frequently used tactic of attraction management in Indian organizations. The actor through this tactic tries to induce a sort of social responsibility in the target by showing dependency on him/her. The actor cashes here on the norm of social responsibility which requires people to help those who are helpless and who depend on them. This is especially relevant in the Indian society where showing dependency on one's superiors is valued.

This tactic can be used most effectively if the actor is authoritarian or nurturant-task oriented. The probability of success increases if the supervisor is himself/herself authoritarian or nurturant-task oriented. This is especially so if the organization is privately managed and the actor deals with non-technical workers.

Using a Third Person

This tactic involves taking the help of a third person who is not directly affected by the interaction between the actor and the target. Help from a third person can be taken in two ways. First, the actor can approach the target person directly and tell the target about his/her important connections (both "real" and "make-believe") with people inside and/or outside the organization, and thus provides cues of how useful he/she can be to the target. One important precaution should be taken while using this tactic: the duration of relationship between the target and the actor should not be of long-standing. This precaution is taken because, in short duration relationships, the target is not aware about all the connections of the actor ensuring greater maneuverability on the part of the actor to exaggerate about his/her connections. Secondly, the actor can approach a third person and exaggerate the admirable qualities of the target person before him/her in the hope that the third person will relay it to the target.

This tactic can be used effectively by those persons who are participative in nature and want to counter the excessive control exercised by the superiors. It is generally used by non-technical workers in private firms.

References

Shankar, A. (1992). *lngratiation in organizations: Tactics, measurement, and correlates.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kanpur, India: Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur.

Shankar, A., Ansari, M. A., & Saxena, S. (1993). *Development of a measure of ingratiatory behavior in organizations.* Kanpur, India: Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Mimeographed.