The Middle Manager and the Tactics of Power Expansion: A Case Study*

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The problems associated with middle managers have not received much attention in the literature. The power conflicts and the political interactions as experienced by middle management are usually dealt with normatively and seldom analyzed sociologically. In this article, Dr. Izraeli treats these important aspects of organizational life from a sociological perspective. Relying on a highly interesting case study, she illustrates the process by which middle managers establish themselves in a new organization. *Ed.*

The role of middle manager[1] in economic organizations entails interesting patterns of strain (Dalton [11]; Fox [14]; and Fletcher [13]). Unlike the foreman operating in the interstices of two organizational structures (Smelser [31], p. 78), the middle manager is clearly a member of management. His[†] concern is less with identity (Roethlisberger [29]; Gardner and Whyte [17]; and Miller and Form [25]) than with attaining influence to be more like the other members of management to whom his values and ambitions are oriented (Fox [14]). His concern with influence also reflects a major dilemma of his role. This article begins with an explanation of the dilemma. Three strategies for coping with it are then considered, and the tactics of a power expansion strategy are analyzed in greater detail.

The Problem of Power Deficiency

The middle manager is often power deficient.[2] That is, he lacks the influence to make other levels in the organization respond to his requests. "Character-

[1] The term as used here refers to those responsible for managing the activities of lower managers. While the middle managers may have access to major organizational resources, they do not have full control over their use. From this perspective a junior manager in a large department, a senior manager in a small department, or even the top executive of a local branch tightly controlled by the head office are all, sociologically speaking, middle managers.

[†] Editors' note: It is understood that the terms "he" and "his" when referring to managers, subordinates or superiors are used in a general sense. This wording was preserved throughout the article in order to avoid the awkward construction of "he or she" and "his or her."

[2] The terms power and influence are used interchangeably in this article. Middle managers' awareness of the shortcomings of their influence is revealed in a study by Maier and Hoffman [23], who found that the predominant factor in the problems that concern middle managers is the acceptance by the subordinates of policies and procedures.

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istically," observes the report in *Work in America,* "middle managers perceive that they lack influence on organization decision making, yet they must implement company policy — and often without sufficient authority or resources to effectively carry it out." (*Work in America* [33], p. 41). They often fail to get the organizational backing needed to exert their formal authority or to promote their personal influence among their subordinates.

The middle manager's performance is strongly affected by his power position in the organization.[3] His power, however, depends upon his ability to share in the control of such valued resources as financial rewards and the authority to hire, fire and promote participants.[4] The middle manager's access to such resources is contingent upon the approval (implicit or explicit) of those who control them and upon the backing of those in a position to overrule him.[5] This limitation distinguishes the position of middle manager from that of his hierarchical superiors, the top management, where important decisions are taken and the means of power usually are concentrated.

There are many reasons why a middle manager may fail to get the support of his boss. A young man better trained professionally than his older superior, or perceived to be too ambitious and eager for promotion, is a threat to the interests of others. When the superior suspects that his subordinate wishes to encroach on his own field of influence, he may subvert the latter's attempts to avail himself of organizational prerogatives.

Thus admittedly, as Blau and Scott [2] (p. 237) point out, while organizations generate the tools which managers can use to exert their authority, to ingratiate themselves among subordinates and win compliance, their ability to gain access to resources and to take advantage of them cannot be considered as given. It is an empirical question that is sociologically problematic.

Modes of Adaptation

This typical problem leads to several typical reactions. They may be considered "modes of adaptation" to the dilemma of power deficiency. Although there are many variations, three major types can be distinguished: the *bureaucratic* mode, the *feudal* mode, and the *expansionist* mode.

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[3] See Pelz [27]; Kahn [19], p. 54; Katz et al. [21]; and Strauss and Sayles [32], p. 336. These studies as well as one by Price [28] (chapters 5 and 6) emphasize the relationship between organizational effectiveness and control systems. Effective management requires the availability of sanctions to reward and punish employees.

[4] On the relationship between influence and control over resources see Gamson [15], Cartwright [7], Etzioni [12], Olsen [26], Blau [1], and Silverman [30].

[5] As Strauss and Sayles [32] (p. 337) point out, "The manager cannot fight for his men or take a critical attitude toward management decisions if his boss forces him to be a 'yes man' . . . . He can behave in this way only if his boss permits him to do so . . . and backs him up when he gets into trouble. . . ."

The Bureaucratic Mode

In the bureaucratic mode, the middle manager adopts a style that consists of applying rules and procedures inflexibly and treating compliance as an end in itself. This style has been well analyzed by Merton [24] (p. 198) as a dysfunctional consequence of the organizational emphasis on obedience. As Crozier [10] (p. 191) explains, the bureaucratic response is less the reflection of a personality disorder (as suggested by Merton) than a rational response to the structural dilemma of the role.

The demand for strict adherence to the rules is one solution for the manager without power since it absolves him from the need to take initiative for which he lacks the structural and situational prerequisites. By narrowing his responsibility to the implementation of rules and regulations, he denies accountability for the outcome of this implementation. Since he lacks the power to change the rules and lacks resources to motivate subordinates, he protects himself from upward criticism by narrowing his responsibility to a strict interpretation of the letter of the law. It is a form of withdrawal aimed at protecting the middle manager and securing for him a quiet life in the organization.

The bureaucratic rules perform a "screening function" (Gouldner [18], p. 164) for the middle manager, concealing the narrow and shaky foundations of his power.[6]

The bureaucratic mode is a feasible strategy where work patterns are well established and work behavior predictable (Crozier [10]), where turnover and absentee rates are low, where few disturbances interrupt the routine of the work and its distribution — that is, where conditions minimize the control function of the middle manager and the need for his active intervention. It is more likely to occur where the job of middle manager is highly routinized, as in the supervision of production departments with long runs that operate in stable markets.

When the job is not routinized and frequent changes must be implemented by middle management, it is more difficult to adopt the bureaucratic stance. Predetermined rules cannot cover all the exigencies of a changing situation. Moreover, research has demonstrated that a bureaucratic managerial style is ineffective for eliciting the cooperation required for subordinates to willingly adapt to changes (Coch and French [8], and Burns and Stalker [5]).

The Feudal Mode

A second typical reaction to the problem of power deficiency is to act only upon specific orders from the immediate superior and to rely on the latter's

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[6] According to Gouldner [18] (p. 165), the rules screen the superiority of the supervisor's power "which might otherwise violate the norm of equality."

power as well as his frequent and direct intervention for getting things done. In the feudal mode the middle manager, lacking power to assert his own position, accepts the domination of a more powerful superior. He acts not as a bureaucrat using the formal authority of his position, but rather as a messenger transmitting instructions from a superior. Like the bureaucrat, he thus absolves himself of responsibility and avoids taking the initiative. However, rather than relying mainly upon predetermined rules, he takes his orders directly from his superior and acts upon his instructions.

The feudal mode may be a highly satisfactory arrangement for both participants provided that (1) the superior refuses to delegate authority and wishes to retain control, and (2) the middle manager is not or has ceased to be ambitious. Where the middle manager is eager to rise up the promotional ladder and where this requires that he impress top management with his ability to take initiative and independent action, the feudal relationship will probably prove unstable.

The Expansionist Mode

The third mode of adaptation and the one which is the central concern of this article is that of power expansion. The tactics commonly followed in advancing this strategy are aimed at gaining control over organizational resources through establishing social relationships with other participants in the organization. The middle manager attempts to develop a network of social relations with others in strategic positions and to surround himself with allies in a position to supply him with resources such as information as well as to conceal his shortcomings from his opponents.

Writers have variously termed such liaisons as cliques (Dalton [11]), coalitions (Gamson [15], and Caplow [6]), cabals (Burns [4]), and factions (Bujra [3]). They have distinguished between types on the basis of membership, function and mode of operation. Underlying their analysis is the principle that the coalition process reshapes the role structure and distorts the relationship between formal status and power. With the help of allies, the middle manager is able to expand his influence and thus overcome the structural limitations of his role. Allies enhance his influence by backing him or by complying with his directives and rendering myriad other services which secure and strengthen his position in the organization.

Forming alliances, however, is problematic; success depends largely on the independent resources the middle manager brings with him to the organization and his ability to use them to his advantage.[7]

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[7] Technical expertise required by the organization and even the ability to get hold of football tickets in great demand are examples of resources which the manager may bring with him. In this sense they are independent resources, as distinguished from organizational resources which are derived from membership in the system.

The New Manager and the Problem of Power Expansion

The problems involved in the expansionist mode are highlighted when the middle manager is new to the organization. The new man suffers the disadvantage of too narrow and too shallow a network of social relations. When he seeks to expand his influence in the organization, he faces a problem in attracting potential allies. Alliances are forged over time from the exchange of valued resources and the awareness of communal interests. They are based on some measure of mutual trust and are strengthened by the bonds of personal sentiment. The new man is likely to begin his organizational career in an isolated position. With all eyes focused on him, some to test his performance and others to test his trustworthiness, his need for allies and for reliable information becomes even more pressing. As Fletcher [13] (p. 138) observes, "A manager on his own is an unwanted guest rather than an honoured resident. He is unsafe." Weaving one's way into the social fabric of personal relations, however, poses several problems for the new middle manager.

The theoretical ideas raised in this article are built around the case of a newly hired department manager seeking to expand his influence. The case is presented with three objectives in mind:

1. To meet the need for case studies of industrial conflict written with a sociological perspective (Caplow [6], p. 324). Real life power struggles are too complex and multifaceted to be simulated either under laboratory conditions or in the normative propositions of game theory.

2. To generate hypotheses concerning (1) the interplay among system elements such as the structure of the formal organization, of industrial relations, and of the marketplace, and (2) the interplay among social processes which take account of the actor's perception of his situation and of his interests. To this end the anthropological method of participant observation is uniquely suitable.

3. To identify some of the problems faced by the new middle manager and the tactics he employed to resolve them. The combination of details in this case is clearly unique, but the issues it raises, the search for allies, the competition for resources, and the threat posed by the newcomer, are all typical processes of organizational life.

The Factory Context

In 1968, shortly after Israel inaugurated its first television transmission station, the Zed factory, formerly a radio assembly plant, opened a television assembly department. A year later when this study began, the department was in the throes of rapid expansion.

The management believed that the television boom was temporary, and it wished to take maximum advantage of market opportunity. Dur-

ing 1969 intensive efforts were made to increase output. The television department grew from forty-one (twenty-eight women and thirteen men) to seventy-five employees.

Melvin Moss was hired to fill a new position, that of television department manager. (See the organization chart in Figure 1.) Until that time, the management of the department had been divided between two people: Tom, the senior technician, who was also perceived to be in charge of the whole department, and Katz, the production manager, who with Tom's cooperation wielded a centralized control over the television department. Tom earned a special administration premium for paper work and for "keeping things running smoothly." In addition he had a monopoly on the more difficult technical repairs of faulty television sets.
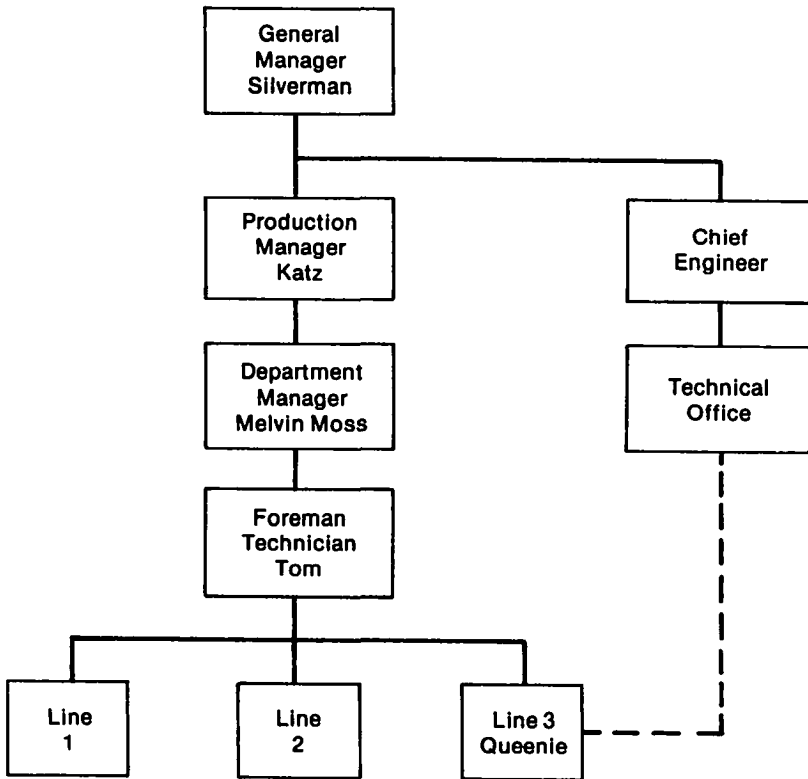

Figure 1   Zed T.V. Department Formal Organization Chart

Katz was known as a man who did not delegate authority readily. There were few decisions taken in the factory which by-passed his office. Foremen complained that "one can't buy a screw around here without Katz's signature." As Katz himself once explained, "Through the foremen, the production manager is the ruler of the factory. The general manager, Mr. Silverman, is like the father of the place, but the production manager rules it."

Two weeks after he hired Moss, Silverman, the general manager, left on an extended trip abroad. He did not clarify the boundaries of the new manager's responsibility prior to his departure. The issue of the distribution of authority between department manager and production manager became a central theme in their relationship. A struggle for control over the television department developed with Moss taking the main offensive.

The Political System

The remainder of this article describes the various tactics used by Moss to expand his influence and reduce Katz's direct control over the television department. Four tactics are analyzed:

1. Neutralization of known supporters of Katz whose cooperation Moss needed.
2. Replacement of those supporters whose assistance he could forego.
3. Commitment of those yet uncommitted to Katz.
4. Mobilization of support from higher up.

Neutralizing Potential Opposition

Accumulated insights into organizational behavior lead one to predict that a new middle manager would seek an alliance with his immediate subordinates, the foremen in the department. If successful, such an alliance secures him access to information and a network of informal shop floor relations usually enjoyed by long-serving subordinates. Loyal foremen are in a position to mobilize rank and file sentiment in favor of a new supervisor (Gouldner [18], p. 84) and to protect him by concealing his errors and inadequacies from those who would benefit from knowing about them (Dalton [11]). Therefore, an alliance with subordinates to some extent "seals-off" the department from critical outside control. The willing compliance of subordinates gives the middle manager a measure of autonomy from his superiors (Blau and Scott [2], p. 162) since he does not need their active interference in resolving problems of discipline. Winning the subordinates' loyalty, however, can entail several serious difficulties:

1. Recruitment from the outside can block the advancement of members within the organization, such as senior foremen who anticipate promotion to the job. When those thwarted in their ambitions are the subordinates

on whose cooperation the new man is dependent, it is unlikely that they will become his allies.[8]

2. The addition of an intermediary level between foreman and production manager widens the gap between the two positions. In so far as managers tend to evaluate their status with reference to their distance from the top of the formal status structure, the lengthening of the hierarchy deflates the value of the foreman's position. It in effect entails demotion.

3. The new manager's interest in expanding his influence in the department comes into conflict with the foremen's interest in preserving both the scope of their autonomy and the privileges they enjoy.

Following an expansionist strategy, the new manager is likely to begin his organizational career with a demand for general tightening up and for greater efficiency. This usually entails narrowing the areas of discretion of subordinates by routinizing their jobs. Such tactics transfer power to the supervisor. They also generate mistrust among foremen.

When the new man is perceived as a block to the mobility of his subordinates and a threat to their autonomy, an alliance between the former and the latter is unlikely. The foremen will probably be drawn closer to others who are also wary of the new man, in this case the production manager.

This Moss wished to avoid. Although Tom's interest in retaining a measure of autonomy over television repairs conflicted with his own interest in proving he could raise the efficiency of the department, Moss refrained from attempting to increase control over Tom. Tom continued to work at his own pace, to stay overtime as often as he wished, and to report his bonus hours directly to Katz. Moss explained, "Tom wastes a lot of time during the day so that he can stay overtime. This bothers me but I am not interested in starting up with him, so I say nothing about his work and don't check up on him. I need him and have no one to replace him. He won't let anyone else into his job without a fight. He won't show them the work. If I put Jack, the new technician, to work with him, he knows Jack will learn the tricks and push himself ahead. Tom doesn't want that. That's why he chose Jim [an older man, a new immigrant and an unqualified technician] to be his assistant. Jim does the simple work for him and Tom feels he can trust him. I don't want a confrontation with Tom because if I push him against the wall, he'll have to take an open stand against me and that I want to avoid."

Tom also preferred not to have to declare which of his two superiors he sided with, since Moss had succeeded in undermining his confidence concerning Katz's continued support for his special position in

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[8] See Levenson [22]. It is likely that the new supervisor will have several subordinates at the level below him and their united opposition to him may provide as serious a threat as the resistance from the superior. Where the right of company men to newly created jobs is established, bringing in a man from the outside could be viewed as a violation of worker's rights and as a cause for organized opposition (Collins [9]).

the department. The middle manager allowed his foreman to play the role of neutral sympathizer. The relationship that developed between the two may be described as a detente, an unarticulated agreement of nonbelligerence rather than an alliance or positive commitment of mutual support.

Strategic Replacements

A change in personnel at the top of the organization usually leads to changes among the ranks of the "first lieutenants." The successor, notes Gouldner [18], makes strategic changes to rid himself of the resistant old guard. By installing his own people in key positions, he assures himself their loyalty as well as improved communication and consequently greater control over the organization.

The middle manager in a small organization is severely limited in his ability to fire those working under him, particularly while he is still new. Such a move would require the approval of his superiors and would have to be justified in terms acceptable to them. It is generally easier to make adjustments in the way jobs are distributed within the department, since such matters usually come within the purview of the supervisor. He can make strategic replacements by transferring those workers who are not committed to his opponents to *key* positions, thus ingratiating himself with them. But key positions in the department, such as foreman, senior technician or quality controller, are likely to be filled by old-timers with longstanding alliances with the old guard. Such senior workers accumulate rights to their jobs as well as other sources of power which make them difficult to displace.

The middle manager then has two possible courses of action. The first is to recommend that the old-timer be promoted to a position outside the department. This tactic is not likely to succeed because he lacks the influence to effect promotions so early in the game, and the superior is probably unwilling to have his allies transferred out of the department. The second alternative is to weaken the old-timer's base of power (for example, by discrediting his suitability for the job), and then to replace him. This tactic has the advantage of being pursuable in the name of company efficiency or increased productivity.

Moss selected the latter course in the case of Queenie. Queenie was in charge of the final quality control station. She had been at Zed for thirteen years but was not well-liked in the department. She refused to reduce the time she took to test a television set, thereby holding up production. Workers complained that she rejected sets for no reason and caused them to lose production bonuses.

Moss would have liked to remove Queenie from the line; first, because she interfered with his aim to expand production and second, because of her loyalty to Katz, the production manager, who backed

her solidly. Katz had an almost mystical faith in her unfailing ability to detect a faulty set, which he considered essential for establishing a market reputation for quality. Moss lacked the power to overrule Katz. Furthermore, no one knew how to operate the station well enough to win Katz's confidence, and Queenie consistently prevented her assistants from learning the complete job.

When a new worker was hired and assigned by the production manager to be assistant to Queenie, Moss resolved to break Queenie's monopoly on quality control with the new worker's help. The process took several months, and a variety of tactics were employed.

Moss was not able to damage Queenie's reputation for high quality. Instead he questioned the functional value of her high standards and insisted that it was at the expense of quantity which the company needed more. He argued that her pedantic standards were not in keeping with market requirements and that her slow pace was costing the company large sums in unearned profit.

Moss's tactic was to discredit Queenie by undermining the value of her contribution and even implying that she was an economic liability. Faced with increasing pressure from the Board to raise production levels, Katz relented. The new worker was promoted to the position of quality controller on the line. Queenie was taken off production. Moss thus succeeded in placing a subordinate of his own choice in a key position while ingratiating himself with the line workers.

Committing the Uncommitted

To make strategic replacements the middle manager must not only remove those who oppose him, but he must also cultivate a cadre of people to put in their place or in other key positions. In small organizations the middle manager usually has less freedom than his formal superiors to bring in new people from the outside or to co-opt them from other departments. When he lacks strong backing, his freedom to maneuver is even more restricted. He must make do with the workers in his own department, selecting from among them those not already strongly committed to the old guard, those he feels he can trust, and those he believes will serve his interests best. If the supervisor is new, he makes these assessments on the basis of incomplete information, on impressions rather than on experience.

There were three categories of employees in the department who were not committed to the production manager: (1) a few dissatisfied oldtimers who felt that Katz had not given them a fair deal in the past; (2) new workers with whom Katz had not yet made any deals, and (3) most of the semiskilled and unskilled female workers, particularly the younger ones for whom work in the factory was only a temporary

interlude before marriage or childbirth. This last group had few stakes in the factory and were politically uninvolved.

Moss attempted to win the support of these three groups, expending different resources for ingratiating himself with each. Among the young female workers Moss relied largely on his personal charm to win their approval. His comments to them were occasionally marked by sexual innuendos usually emphasizing his virility. The mock flirtations were intended to increase his attractiveness and screen the authority nature of the relationship between supervisor and worker.

He maneuvered some dissatisfied old-timers and new male workers into better bonus-paying jobs and into key positions on the line. He even persuaded Katz to pay two of them a special one-time premium to "motivate" them. The resources Moss could distribute were meager. Their value lay largely in their promise of "better things to come." Moss accumulated good will on credit, so to speak, with a commitment to "deliver at a later date."

Since the resources available to the middle manager are usually meager, many of his present gains are made by promises of future rewards. These promises meet with some success because, as Etzioni [12] (p. 125) observes, ". . . the subjects' considerations . . . are probabilistic." Those who comply do so because they believe that the probability of being rewarded in the future merits their cooperation. The stability of their cooperation, however, depends first on the ability of the middle manager to fulfill his debts at least to the extent of retaining his credibility, and second on the costs the subordinates incur in supporting a supervisor known to be at odds with his superior.

A Winning Coalition

The tactic which promises the highest payoff for the new middle manager (C) is to get direct backing from his superior's (B) superior (A).[9] An alliance between C and A strengthens C and makes him less dependent on B. At the same time, it weakens B and constrains him from enforcing his authority on C. It may be further suggested that, suspecting he will not be backed by A, B will initiate activities less frequently for C than otherwise, consequently reducing his attempts to control C and leaving C freer to initiate actions for his own subordinates.

The advantages to lower-level participants of alliances with superiors are obvious. The advantages to be gained by the superordinates are less clear.

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[9] Caplow [6] (p. 51) states that "from the standpoint of the larger organization, the coalition A-C is *improper* [his emphasis] because the organization's representative A has undermined the legitimate authority of B over C." Unfortunately, the term "improper" is normative since, in effect, any coalition of two people undermines the authority of the third person in the triad.

Why should A override his immediate subordinate B and lend his support to C? There are several possible reasons. A may be impressed with C's abilities and perhaps even view him as a successor to B. Or he may consider B disloyal or overly ambitious. A third reason is that A may wish to use a rapprochement with C to tighten his control over B as well as to gain access to information directly from lower echelons. Variations of this tactic are the "open-door policy" where shop floor workers are invited to "chat" informally and the democratic "committee policy" where lower management on the departmental level holds weekly meetings to which A asks to be invited. While such policies are pursued in the name of greater democratization of control, they in fact serve a social control function for top management in relation to those in the middle.

When the general manager, Silverman, returned after three months abroad, he came under strong pressure from the Board to increase production. Market demand for the Zed television set was heavy, and the company had invested a considerable sum importing parts for assembly. In the past, Silverman had relied on the production manager to keep him informed on events in the factory and to meet additional production requirements. Moss's harsh criticisms, however, shook his confidence in Katz.

Silverman urged Katz to refrain from direct interference in the management of the television department. The general manager's support was aimed at encouraging the flow of information from Moss as well as at putting pressure on both the production manager and the department manager to raise output.

Silverman's intervention led to Katz's withdrawal from territory which Moss sought to dominate. Katz appeared less often on the shop floor of the department, leaving Moss free to exert influence over a greater number of people and over a wider range of issues than before. Moss observed with considerable pleasure, "Katz used to give 85 percent of the instructions to the workers and I only 15 percent. Now it's the other way around. I give 85 percent and he only 15 percent. Even Farla [the chargehand] got instructions to report directly to me."

Katz, however, did not transfer such important resources as financial rewards, promotions, and transfers to Moss. Furthermore, his own people were in charge of other departments supplying materials and services to the television department. This hindered Moss from developing horizontal links that would have enabled him to by-pass Katz. Consequently, in Kaplan's terms, Silverman's support increased the *domain* and *scope* of Moss's power but not the *weight* of his power (Kaplan [20], pp. 14-15). He remained dependent on Katz's cooperation for establishing the influence that he was in principle free to exert.

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In the case of a power struggle between C and B, winning the direct support of the opponent's (B) superior (A) can be an important source of influence for the middle manager (C). The coalition between A and C is more likely to persist if B is not transferable. Otherwise, either C will be promoted to the position of B, or the A-C coalition will break as B realigns himself with his superior. Where A controls organizational resources, the A-C coalition is inherently unstable since, unless C has unusual qualifications, A has little to gain from alienating his subordinate B. He is able to win C's compliance without aligning himself with C against B.

Conclusion

Formal organizations generate resources which managers use to enhance their influence over subordinates. Control over organizational resources, however, is differentially distributed. For the middle manager access to them is largely contingent upon the backing of his formal superiors. When he fails to get backing, he faces the dilemma of power deficiency. This dilemma was analyzed and strategies for coping with it were considered.

The case of a new manager was used to highlight the tactics of a power expansion mode of adaptation to the problem of power deficiency. Engaged in a competitive struggle for control over the television department with his immediate superior, the new manager sought alliances with those whose support could enhance his own influence. He attempted to remove the loyal supporters of his opponent from key positions or to undermine their influence within the domain over which he sought control.

Finally, an expansionist strategy which brings the middle manager into conflict with a strongly entrenched superior is more likely to be successful in an expanding organization where opportunities are plentiful and the competition for scarce resources is consequently less intense.

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