Give me What I Want but here's What you Need: An Exploration of the Juxtaposition of Mid Level Managers as both Follower and Leader

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The catalyst for this study was the emergence of repeated statements by mid to senior level banking mangers about what they wanted to see in their supervisor and what they thought their employees wanted from them while attending an advanced degree program for senior bankers. These managers are questioned to ascertain if what they want from their managers coincides to what they feel their direct reports want from them as leaders. 574 mid to senior level managers are asked two open-ended questions and the results are categorized into four distinct areas: maturity, task engagement, relationship engagement, and personality. Responses provide an overview of similarities and misconceptions these managers hold in terms of understanding their relationships with both their subordinates and senior executives. It becomes clear that mid level managers are challenged by the duality of their roles. The pattern of responses give rise to the recommendation of management approaches to assist in keeping the mid level manager seamlessly connected to both senior executives and subordinates.

INTRODUCTION

Quite often there exists discrepancies in how we would like to be treated by our senior leaders and how we treat direct reports. In fact this dilemma exists both in our professional and personal lives. Research by Gallrein, Carlson, Holstein, and Leising (2013) shows that people are consistently unaware of how others uniformly view them. Such lack of self-knowledge in how we are perceived by others serves as a fore-runner to our own inconsistencies in how we actually think and feel about what we want and what we expect from other people. In other words, how can we understand what people want and expect from us when we don't even know what they 'think' of us? Further complicating the pursuit of finite answers, we are hindered by how we describe other people. Quite often we definitively define the features of individuals we don't like more so than people we do like (Leising, Ovstrovski, & Borkenau, 2012). Also hampering the quest for categorical truths in understanding our cognitive perceptions is the demeanor individuals assume in their workplace setting. Consequently, studies such as this, which is concerned with workplace opinions of others, seek not to arrive at a concluding observation which holds true across all realms but to merely identify inconsistencies in our professional opinion of others.

BACKGROUND

The available research in the area of our perception of self and others proffers that we are not connected with the external environment's perception of us; in fact we are well removed from it (Leising, Krauss, Kohler, Hinsen, & Clifton, 2011). This may be explained by Pronin (2007) whose research claims that we as humans have a bias towards the self and as a result expose ourselves to mis-perceptions. To remove this bias Yaniv and Choshen-Hillel (2012) recommend a perspective-taking approach so as to better understand what others think of us and thereby better manage our own actions. This approach to cognitive self-management helps us remain neutral in forming opinions of others and also in assisting us in understanding our own self perception. It also helps us to question our own opinions and avoid immediate acceptance of what we believe might be true (Uhlman & Cohen, 2007; Heiphetz, Spelke, Harris, & Banaji, 2013). And of non-obvious importance is the fact that we sometimes lie to ourselves about what other people think and about how we think which in turn distorts how we view others (Hillbig & Hessler, 2012). What the summation of the aforementioned results to is the realization that how we think of ourselves and how we think others think of us is exceptionally complicated and susceptible to emotional and cognitive influences. What we do know is that the better we understand how we think and the more we are self aware the more fluid we can become as both a follower and a leader. Quite possibly our emotional intelligence may have an influence on how we interact with and perceive cues from others.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

With information collected over a 10 year period this research seeks to identify if there are marked differences between what we would like to see in our supervisors and if we exhibit those same desired criteria as a leader to direct reports. As a guide to all managers in supervisory roles this research seeks to draw attention to the issue that what we expect as a direct report does not always correlate with how we manage subordinates. This disconnect is shown in Figure 1 where we see that what we would like from our supervisors quite often does not correlate with our managerial actions towards our direct reports. Simply put, is there a discrepancy between what we want from our supervisor and what we give our subordinates? This study also goes as far as to identify that what we want from both our supervisors and direct reports fall into categories, which, can serve as guidelines in improving managerial performance.

FIGURE 1
MANAGERIAL FLUIDITY
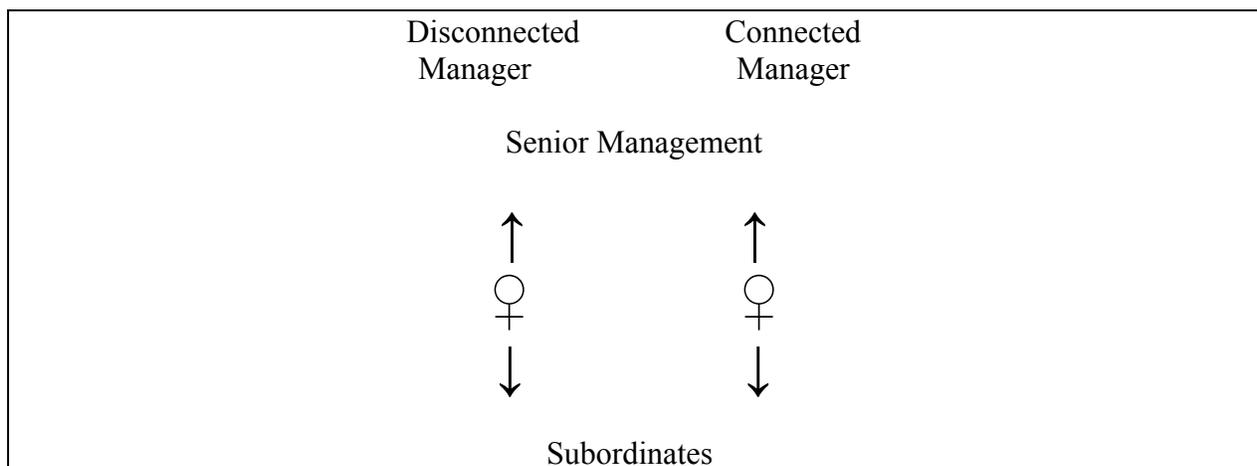
The study serves to highlight how mid-level management are compelled to perform in two positions: that of follower and leader. This dichotomy serves to illustrate how mid level management is challenged in satisfying both roles and the need to provide support and training in meeting their dual professional obligations. The study also explores various forms of leadership such as servant leadership and authentic leadership in search of a functional leadership style which would accommodate better execution in both roles.

METHODOLOGY

This original study used a more direct form of inquiry in gathering information, that of asking individuals their opinions. 574 mid-level to senior level managers from the banking industry while attending a training session were asked to anonymously complete two statements:

1. "I wish my manger would…"
2. "My subordinates wished that I would…".

As opposed to questionnaires which quantify and interpret answers to questions, the decision was taken by the researchers to utilize these open-ended questions in an effort to gather unfiltered information from the respondents. The aspiration in the methodology was to by-pass 'how' respondents answer questions which may or may not pertain to their exact viewpoint and go directly to interpretation and reporting of their personal statements as a gauge to their viewpoint. This method is intended to bring us one step closer to the information and avoid misinterpretation. The respondents had an average age of 41 and an average of 14 years work experience. Males accounted for 69% of the group while females made up the remaining 31%. The banking institutions where the respondents came from varied from small local banks with $25 million capitalization to large banks with over $1 billion in capital. All the respondents' cards were recorded each year over the ten year period, then destroyed.

RESULTS

As can be expected, a plethora of responses were received in answering the two open-ended questions. The responses were grouped into various categories and sub-categories if the frequency the response warranted sub-categorization. Identified in Table 1 are the identified categories:

TABLE 1
CATEGORY ANSWERS

Job Maturity	Task Engagement
Autonomy	Structuring Communication
Competence	Evaluative Communication
Career Development	Leading
Inclusion	Disturbance Handling
	Operational Involvement
Relationship Engagement	**Personality**
Receptive Communication	Fairness
Interpersonal/Group Involvement	Open-mindedness
	Ego-strength
	Conscientiousness
	Agreeableness
	Integrity

The results yielded two major issues: it uncovered the frequency of responses thereby identifying the major areas of concerns to individuals as both supervisors and subordinates, and secondly it identified the trends of these responses over the ten year period thereby identifying shifts in perceptions. Possibly, a third directive would be in the identification of a style of leadership that appears to be preferred as both manager and subordinate. In terms of frequencies, the main issue of concern for subordinates is their need for their superior to have integrity and to engage in open, honest communication. More than 40% of respondents addressed these issues which impact all four main categories above. Over the ten year period the highest frequency never exceeded 46% for any one particular type of response. On the other end of the spectrum with the lowest frequency (11%) was subordinates need for less micromanagement and more decision making. Any issues below 10% were not considered valid concerns. In order to portray the type of responses submitted listed below in table 2 are the highest and lowest frequency responses which were categorized according to what people wanted from their direct supervisor:

TABLE 2
FREQUENCY RESPONSES

I wish my manger would:	
40%-46%	**11%-20%**
Be more patient with me	Trust me more in terms of my abilities
Be more organized	Stop micro-managing me
Communicate honestly	Recognized my hard work
My subordinates wish I would:	
40%-46%	**11%-20%**
Be less demanding	Communicate better
Be more available to them	Give more responsibility
Coach, mentor, train me more	Be less rigid

The above sample responses, and others, were, as stated earlier, categorized into four main areas. In the period between 2003 and 2013 as outlined in Table 3 there has been some changes in what individuals want from their supervisors and what they think their subordinates want from them.

TABLE 3
MANAGER RESPONSES

	Year: 2003 Role Manager/Subordinate		Year 2013 Role Manager/Subordinate	
Maturity	.23	.12	.29	.29
Task Engagement	.39	.34	.32	.34
Relationship engagement	.20	.35	.17	.17
Personality	.20	.19	.22	.22

There was a distinct direction of responses in the Maturity category where individuals are increasingly seeking more development in terms of managing the direction of their career and also recognize that their direct reports want more assistance from them in career development. In terms of Task Engagement it would appear that there is less day to day operations involvement needed from superiors while superiors feel they still need to be involved in the tasks of direct reports. With regard to Relationship Engagement there has been a distinct change in the level of working relationship that

mangers need from their own superiors and give to their subordinates. In the Personality area the need for more quality in personal interaction in both directions grew over the 10 year period. This informs us that relationships are not being cultivated to the level where individuals feel connected to an organization. And as relationships quite often drive positive performance the lack and need thereof warrants attention so as to realize long term gains in productivity and employee retention.

DISCUSSION AND DISCOVERY

Quite often what we want from our boss and what she/he thinks we want from them are different. This research sought to examine if there was a disconnect within individuals in this domain. The frequencies of the responses indicate that mid level managers would like better quality time with their direct supervisor in terms of better communication, patience on projects, and the need to feel their abilities are recognized and trusted by their boss. In turn, they feel that their direct reports would like them to be less demanding and show an interest in developing them as an employee. However, the question arises that after 574 responses why would there and why should there be a difference in what we want from our boss and what we think our subordinates want from us? This disparity exists. A common thread that underlines most of the responses is that the critical issue that is causing problems is the scarcity of 'time – time to train, to mentor, to communicate, to build trust. To alleviate this conflict of time demands an examination of the approach currently used in leading may result in the re-alignment of priorities and development of a more suitable style of leadership. The need of a better way to manage in the banking industry is evident and what comes to the surface is the notion that in an industry that has customer service as a priority there is a gap in the continuation of that service mentality in respect to facilitating employees to be as effective as possible in their jobs. Consequently it appears that what may remedy the discrepancy between what managers want form their superior and what their direct reports need from them is the implementation of authentic leadership, servant leadership, and 360 degree performance evaluations.

Authentic leadership dates its origins back to the 1930's when Barnard (1939) posited that leaders should treat subordinates in a responsible manner. Essentially this means treating people the way we ourselves would like to be treated. In a business context, authentic leadership emphasizes a leader imprinting their personality of honesty and integrity on the organization. The result is a workforce that is informed, feels included, and buys in to the expectations of their leader. Authentic leadership is an evolving phenomenon where leader's professional actions are aligned with their internal core beliefs (Harvey, Martinko, & Garndner, 2006). As the leader's values and belief system gives voice to the firm so too does it give voice to its employees.

Servant leadership explores how a leader enables followers to be effective by showing concern for their well-being and realizing that in their achievements lies the successes of the firm (Schneider & George, 2003). This concept developed by Greenleaf (1977) has at its core the notion that a leader best serves followers by being a facilitator in helping them perform their best. This theory of leadership recognizes that the employees of the company are the engine that gives the organization its success so the leaders must service this engine to keep it performing at the highest levels. In addition to being enablers of success, research by Washington, Sutton, and Field (2006) indicates that servant leaders also possess traits of empathy, integrity, competence, and agreeableness. These traits, we observe, also align with the authentic leadership approach to leadership as well as being compatible with the taxonomy of the Big Five personality model (Digman, 1990).

At the juncture of what we as both managers and direct reports need in terms of managerial traits is the marriage of authentic leadership and servant leadership. Although these approaches may seem at first glance to be humanly amicable in their approach it must be remembered that authentic leadership utilizes total honesty which in many cases comes in the form of 'tough love' without any sugar coating. Nichols and Erakovich (2013) write that "authentic leaders use hard evidence and base discussion on the merits of the issues". This does comply with the responses we received in our research indicating that employees would like more forthright information sharing and direct communication from their supervisor in the

establishment of parameters and required standards. In other words, employees are not afraid of hard work and challenges as long as its accompanied by good direction and unbiased communication.

The final component in framing our needs as members of both constituents is the need to be self-aware. This, we feel is provided by incorporating 360° degree feedback. This method of performance evaluation increases an individual's awareness of how they are perceived by providing feedback on how they perceived by mangers, peers, subordinates, and main external contacts. Also termed Multi-Rater Feedback the objective is to provide an individual with unbiased information on how they perform in their professional capacity. Tornow (1993) highlights that the benefit of this approach to evaluation is the presence of raters from different areas of interaction. The result is that a performance evaluation is not just that of a supervisor and subordinate and therefore possibly biased. The inherent benefit of 360° feedback is that it not only evaluates an employee's performance but it also provides direction in identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses. While research by Morgan, Cannan, and Culinane (2005) show that 360° feedback has not enjoyed success across all industries we feel that the context for which it is used is key. If it is used to 'direct' behavior then it may be seen as punitive and have adverse impact. However, if it is merely used as an unbiased source to 'inform' then we believe the opportunity is created for subtle changes to occur.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We had as our purpose in embarking upon this research to uncover whether mid level and senior managers behave in a manner towards their direct reports as they would like to be treated by their senior supervisors. And as with all research the results serve as guideline to the future. Our results provided us not just with existent differences but also a natural recommendation of a preferred form of management to be utilized emerged. This form of management serves to turn the disconnected manager into a connected manager and is displayed in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
COMPONENTS OF A CONNECTED MANAGER
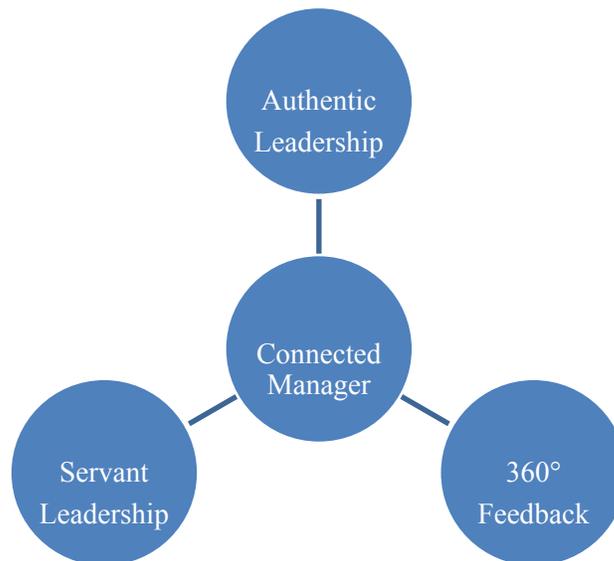
The figure above serves to illustrate the direction our research points to in closing the gap between what individuals need from their superiors and what their subordinates need from them. This

recommendation is made with the backdrop that a mid level manger may eventually become a senior executive with the capacity to directly influence mid level managers and thereby create a seamless managerial persona of organization expectations. Our proposal stems from feedback from hundreds of mid to senior level banking managers' opinions on what think their subordinates believe of them and what they would like to see in their own supervisor. Consequently what results is the need for open, direct, and honest communication from managers who are fair minded and supportive. The supportive aspect comes from servant leadership while the directness and fair-mindedness comes from authentic leadership. The final component of open and honest communication comes from the unbiased, self awareness increasing 360° feedback. We find all these methods to be unique in their approach but also very complementary in a rounded out approach to management that seeks to reduce mis-communication, mis-connection, and mis-management. If merely used as a peripheral guideline in businesses where the commodity of time is at a premium it would assist in reducing the number of instances of people management errors.

In the absence of the ability to introduce the above measures this research serves as a directive to senior management to ensure that the management style used in an organization is uniform so as to ensure all employees are aware of expectations from both themselves and from their managers. The anticipated result of this is that employees across all departments share a commonality in that all are aware that the organization has required standards of performance and communication of both employees and managers. This uniformity therefore prevents ambiguity and could possibly assist in the retention of quality employees who feel alienated by a dichotomy of messages. In the absence of organizational direction we subscribe to Bleidorn and Ködding's (2013) viewpoint that individuals must develop a consistent self perception. This, we feel, will assist in the reduction of mis-perceptions of our interactions with others.

CONCLUSION

The search for information about organizations is an ongoing process which seeks to inform and direct better management. Even more so, the interpretation of information garnered from various organizations sometimes conclude with more questions than answers to the queries of the original research. This study sought to remove any ambiguity in interpretation and any pre-suppositions in the seeking of information for advanced research. As such, we sought to give the mid level manager of the financial industry a voice in what they think. Our understanding in doing this was that secondary analysis be removed so that the opinions of managers could be viewed in their original form without any 'imposed' analysis so that academics and practitioners could use the information as a barometer of human perception. It is also hoped that rather than recommend definite paths of future behavior (although which we did) that there was enough information presented for practitioners to develop their own appropriate response for future behavior and that future academics gain another smidgen of information in directing next-step research.

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