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Understanding Socially Inhibited Behaviors in Managers

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INTRODUCTION

The executive director of our organization seems so aloof. He is very bright and effective, which comes through when you meet him in the office but not in the hallway. He seems uptight at staff meetings and at large staff gatherings. Sometimes he appears to be more interested in data or figures than in people or communications. He presents the image of having all the answers and rarely asks for assistance or advice. He seems to be either busy in his office alone or entering the building by the back door. Staff sometimes describe him as unfriendly or cold.

The manager in this vignette might be perceived to be shy, introverted, inhibited, unsociable, or lacking social skills. Alternatively, he might be seen as responding to situational factors in the organization's culture and/or perception of his role within that culture. In fact, the manager's behavior most likely stems from a combination of staff perceptions along with personal and situational factors. Regardless of its origins, socially inhibited behavior by a manager can contribute to such workplace problems as low staff morale, poor interdepartmental communications, and confusion about the organization's goals. This study is an effort to define socially inhibited behaviors among managers, explore the implications of these behaviors, identify ways to assist managers with tendencies toward socially inhibited behaviors, and help staff relate to such managers.

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Management behaviors that could be considered socially inhibited usually reflect a lack of action where managers may be less likely than others to:

- solicit information or feedback;
- give appropriate praise and reinforcements;
- self-disclose;
- perform in undefined or less formal roles (such as mingling at a social event or initiating informal conversations);
- share their own problems and successes; and
- deal with conflict.

Socially inhibited behaviors can be thought of as occurring on a continuum. Most managers occasionally exhibit some type of inhibited behavior, such as not speaking up in a meeting, and the impact of this behavior may have little consequence over time. In some cases, inhibited behavior may be highly appropriate since, as Handy (1985) has noted, the actions of managers must take into account not only their own preferred style of operating, but also the leadership styles of subordinates along with task and environmental factors. In addition, at least one observer of organizational leadership has argued that the "psychologically distant" manager may contribute to the development of more effective teams than the manager who emphasizes smooth interpersonal relations (Fiedler, 1967). However, repeated displays of inhibited behavior (or the inability to be less inhibited as situations require) may negatively impact relationships with superiors, colleagues, and staff; reduce the manager's ability to make informed decisions; and hinder both organizational effectiveness and managerial performance.

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS UNDERLYING SOCIALLY INHIBITED BEHAVIOR

Little attention seems to have been paid to the origins or consequences of socially inhibited behavior in the workplace. However, the literature on shyness and introversion provides clues to some of the factors underlying socially inhibited behavior.

Shyness. Perceiving someone as "shy" is one way that staff in an organization might characterize a manager whose behavior is socially inhibited. While shyness is a commonly used term in everyday life (Zimbardo, 1977), the research literature fails to provide a clear and shared usage of this concept. Leery (1986) identified fourteen different definitions of shyness, and Crozier (1990) has categorized them in terms of

personality traits, situational variables, emotional states, and personal problems. Given the commonly accepted notion that effective management involves developing the “best fit” between personal style and situational factors (Handy, 1985), the personality and situational perspectives seem most relevant to expanding our understanding of socially inhibited managerial behaviors.

Shyness as a personality trait. Much of the research on shyness as a dispositional tendency or trait indicates that self-consciousness is at its core. The self-conscious actor focuses on how he or she is performing rather than on the normal intentionality of his or her actions. Social anxiety may result from conflict between the public self and the ideal self (Leery, 1986; Crozier, 1990). Cheek and Briggs (1990), in their review of the social psychology literature, identified a distinctive pattern of cognitions typical among shy people. Unlike those who are not shy, shy individuals tend to expect they will be negatively evaluated during social interactions, become anxiously self-preoccupied during these interactions, and judge themselves more negatively than others judge them. Shy people are more likely to behave in a cautious, self-protective manner, to conform to majority opinion, and to avoid disclosing information about themselves. DePaulo, Epstein, and LeMay (1990) found that in the face of possible negative evaluation, socially anxious individuals tend to withdraw psychologically by talking less, and they usually engage in more superficial dialogue. Paradoxically, in situations where socially anxious individuals most want to make a good impression, they may be least likely to do so because of such self-protective strategies.

Shyness as a situational factor. Although the conceptualization of shyness as arising from social anxiety has been highly influential in past years, it is not without its critics. Crozier (1990), for example, points out that those who focus on social anxiety may fail to take into account situational determinants of behavior. Shyness may be particularly influenced by the role of the other person(s) in the interaction and the “rules” of the interaction. Van der Molen (1990) identified four dimensions that influenced the feeling of shyness: the size of the audience, the degree of familiarity with the audience, the level of formality of the situation, and whether or not the person was required to take initiative or simply respond. The most significant finding was that shyness is most likely to occur in informal situations. The author notes that the less familiar the individual is with the rules of the situation, the more difficult it becomes to select an appropriate behavior. Crozier (1986) found that shyness was also associated with interacting with authority figures, the expectation of being evaluated, and conspicuousness, such as being the only individual of one’s gender or race. Jones

and Carpenter (1986) point out that the nature of the interpersonal relationship is critical in understanding shyness. Elements that influence shyness include: the level of intimacy, duration of the relationship, amount of interpersonal contact, and the goals of the individuals in the relationship.

Culture may also be an important situational determinant of socially inhibited behavior. In modern Western society, the norm seems to be one of assertive, extravert behaviors, whereas Asians, for example, are more likely to be socialized to show obedience and restraint. Van der Molen (1990) notes that the Javanese culture considers shyness a virtue. Higher incidences of shyness also have been identified among Japanese, Taiwanese, and Hawaiians. Shyness seems to be less common among Israelis, whose culture cultivates the frank and free expression of opinions.

Introversion. Another way of thinking about socially inhibited behavior is in the context of introversion. Although the terms shyness and introversion are commonly used interchangeably, current research indicates that the two concepts are not the same. Introversion, as conceptualized by Carl Jung (1971), is characterized by a direction of one's interests and energy to the internal rather than the external world. Although Jung's introverted type may manifest itself in a lower level of social behavior than the extravert, the critical factor in determining type is not one of behavior but of motivation. As Briggs (1988) has suggested, unlike the "socially anxious shy" individual who wishes she or he could be more sociable, the "introverted shy" individual prefers solitary pursuits, but can effectively take part in social situations if need be.

More recent research on introversion links low sociability and low energy and activity (Miller, 1991). Morris (1979) identified four components of introversion: social activity (introverts spend less time and energy socializing), social facility (introverts are less skilled at social interactions), risk-taking (introverts tend to take fewer risks and are less adventurous), and preference for reflection and introspection as opposed to action. Under stress, introverts prefer to be alone, whereas extraverts prefer to be with others. Introverts also appear to have very different expectations about social relations than do extraverts. Thorne (1987), in a study of conversations between introverts and extraverts, found that while extraverts tended to assume similarities between themselves and their conversation partners, introverts were less likely to expect to share common ground. In addition, the conversations of introverts tend to be more task-oriented than those of extraverts.

Introversion may play a much larger role than social anxiety in explaining socially inhibited behavior in managers. For example, Kroeger and Thuesen (1992) used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to survey

over 12,000 managers and found that 54% of middle managers, 44% of senior managers (branch and division heads), and 53% of top executives could be characterized as introverts. The authors note that the introvert's natural independence and ability to provide direction are strengths needed in management positions. On the other hand, introverted managers might not be sufficiently expressive and demonstrative, especially in stressful situations, and thereby may inadvertently give the impression of being impatient or disapproving. In addition to stressful situations, the factors that might elicit introverted behavior include: meeting new people, informal or ambiguous situations, and certain tasks that require introspection or an inward focus.

In order to integrate the findings from the research literature on introversion and shyness, Figure 1 summarizes the elements that seem to underlie socially inhibited behavior. Individuals who tend toward introversion and social anxiety may be more likely to respond to situations in an inhibited way. In most cases, socially inhibited behavior appears to stem from a combination of situational and personal factors. The requirements of most management positions make it unlikely that an individual with more than a mild level of social anxiety would be selected for a management position, because the extreme self-consciousness and fear of evaluation associated with social anxiety simply are not congruent with the role expectations of a manager. However, it is certainly possible to imagine how mild levels of social anxiety might be elicited by situational factors and thus inhibit managers' behavior. For example, a manager might be more reticent with a senior executive than with his or her own staff. In

FIGURE 1. A Summary of Factors Contributing to Socially Inhibited Behavior

| | Social Anxiety | Introversion |
|---------------------|---|--|
| SITUATIONAL FACTORS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possibility of evaluation • authority figures • large/unfamiliar audience • culture/gender differences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stress • unfamiliar people • informality/ambiguity • task elicits introspection/reserve |
| PERSONAL FACTORS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-consciousness • expectation of negative evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • introspection • low social activity • low social facility • low risk-taking |

most management situations, therefore, social anxiety, if it occurs, is likely to occur in combination with situational factors, and these situational factors may be the most critical element in inhibiting behavior. Likewise, a tendency toward introversion, which appears to be common among managers, may be further elicited by situational factors such as meeting new people or dealing with ambiguous tasks or information or interactions.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WORKPLACE: MOVING FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

The literature on shyness, social anxiety, and introversion points to the importance of examining both personality characteristics and responses to situational factors in understanding socially inhibited behavior. Based on informal interviews with six senior managers in human services and business (two directors of county social services departments, one executive director of a large nonprofit agency, a bank president and senior vice president, and a division director for a computer software company), open-ended questions were used to explore each individual's management style, as well as their observations of others in their organizations. The information from these interviews, which cannot be generalized due to the small sample, was used to illustrate concepts identified in the literature as well as identifying areas for further research.

All of the managers interviewed readily identified management behaviors that could be interpreted as socially inhibited. Examples of such behaviors included persistent reticence or reserve:

- a preference for written over oral communication;
- a tendency to analyze decisions alone before involving others;
- a preference for solitary activities;
- a reluctance to offer opinions; and
- a tendency to avoid confrontation.

Those interviewed appeared to be more comfortable with the term "introverted" to describe socially inhibited behaviors than with "shyness," which implies fear or timidity—personal characteristics which usually prevent individuals from assuming management positions. Examples of behavior specifically described as introverted included: "inward directed," "solitary," "pleasant but not warm," "not sensitive to how people feel," "spends less time and energy socializing," and "has fewer interpersonal skills than extraverts."

Several of those interviewed revealed that they perceive themselves as

naturally introverted in their personal lives but as being extraverted at work, which was seen as a necessary component of being in a leadership role. One manager observed that although she can be extraverted in almost any situation, she is happiest when she can be introverted.

Regardless of whether managers considered themselves to be more introverted or more extraverted, there was consensus that certain situations can elicit introverted tendencies. These included:

- unstructured or spontaneous situations;
- meeting new people;
- dealing with people in authority;
- being criticized or under attack;
- when analyzing, as opposed to implementing decisions; and
- when acquiring and processing complex information.

In addition, certain aspects of organizational culture were thought to induce socially inhibited behaviors. For example, one manager suggested that “top-down” organizations, where people’s opinions are not sought out and staff are not encouraged to be involved in decision-making, can induce socially inhibited behaviors. Another manager noted that increased training on sexual harassment may produce a heightened sense of formality in the workplace and that individuals may display more socially inhibited behaviors.

Finally, the interviews suggested that the interplay between culture or ethnicity of the individual manager and that of significant others in the organization can have important implications. One African-American manager noted that his culturally-developed “reserve” was interpreted by white supervisors as an unwillingness to argue his point of view aggressively in one instance, or to give praise to colleagues in another. In the first instance, his supervisor’s values conflicted with his own culturally ingrained value for diplomacy and behaving as a gentleman. In the latter, the conflict was with his cultural perception that praising the performance of others is condescending unless the performance is truly outstanding. In both cases, the African-American manager was required to modify his normative behavior in order to succeed as a manager in a predominantly white organization.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIALLY INHIBITED BEHAVIORS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While we have observed that an array of socially inhibited behaviors may be common among managers and appear to reflect a combination of

personal and situational factors, the challenge is to explore the relevance of such factors for improving organizational communications. To address this challenge, we focus on the individual manager, other staff (including more senior managers, colleagues, and subordinates) who interact with the manager, and the organizational culture and structure.

Implications for managers. One starting point for managers in thinking about their own personality, behavioral patterns, and situational tendencies is to consider how socially inhibited behaviors may relate to managerial roles. Quinn (1988) has identified eight managerial roles (producer, director, innovator, broker, mentor, facilitator, monitor, and coordinator), each of which involves particular activities and requires certain skills. It is unlikely that extreme extraverted or extreme introverted behaviors would be appropriate for any of these managerial roles. However, it is possible to think of roles in terms of those likely to require a more extraverted or outgoing approach for implementation and those that would relate to a more introverted approach. For example, the roles of monitor and coordinator emphasize information collecting and maintaining organizational stability, and include technical skills related to budgeting and fiscal controls, information systems, and quality control (Edwards & Austin, 1991). These roles may offer the best fit for a manager with strong introverted tendencies. The broker role, on the other hand, is primarily involved with acquiring resources, and thus needs the strong interpersonal and political skills as well as an external focus which is characteristic of extraverts. Several of the managers interviewed, in fact, described themselves as more introverted when making decisions (producer role) and more extroverted when implementing decisions (director role).

Managers with strong tendencies toward socially inhibited behaviors may either settle comfortably into lower or middle management positions that require primarily technical expertise and organizational skills, or they may find themselves unhappily "stuck" in these positions. One of those interviewed observed that a bright, but introverted manager in his organization is unlikely to progress beyond his current position. Although he feels "pigeonholed" in a technical role, he has been unable to take on more general management responsibilities due, in part, to persistent introverted behavior.

Senior managers who have acquired the capacity to control their tendency toward socially inhibited behavior may be able to delegate some of the management roles requiring extraversion. For example, one executive director described herself as "naturally" introverted, but capable of being extremely extraverted. Although she was very good at brokering activities (fund-raising and other resource development, and dealing with political

aspects of the organization), she most enjoyed the conceptualizing and planning activities, and she least enjoyed group facilitator activities such as staff training meetings. When the position of deputy director became open, she consciously recruited someone who was quite extraverted in order to be able to delegate some of the management roles requiring extraversion. This allowed her to spend more time on planning and program design, which was not only beneficial to the agency, but also provided her with a way of reenergizing herself.

The concept of reenergizing oneself is relevant to both introverted and extroverted managers. Kroeger and Thuesen (1992) noted that an effective way for managers to determine whether they have strong introverted or extraverted tendencies is to think about which activities make them feel energized and which make them feel depleted. Extraverts need to be with people to feel energized and they usually thrive on group interactions. Introverts, on the other hand, need to have time alone in order to "re-charge."

Another strategy that socially inhibited managers can use to connect better in situations that require extraversion is to designate a staff member to serve, in part, as an "advance person." This idea is drawn from the political arena, where candidates employ staff to "scout the territory" prior to the candidate's arrival. By collecting information about significant others and building relationships, the advance person can assist the manager by laying the groundwork needed for the manager to make a more personal connection. For example, a senior manager described herself as naturally introverted when she meets a new staff person for the first time, finding herself at a loss for words because she has no context for conversation. The senior manager noted that if the new staff person were "properly introduced" (i.e., if she were given information about him or her that provided a context for the interaction), she would then have some basis for conversation, illustrating the notion that introverts may be less likely than extraverts to assume they have anything in common with new people they meet, especially in informal situations. Involving staff who can do advance work may be valuable for senior managers who tend to be more introverted.

Implications for staff. The socially inhibited manager in the introductory vignette was characterized by staff as unfriendly, aloof, and more interested in data than in people. Crowell (1982) noted that agency administrators, particularly in larger organizations, often become isolated from staff and as a result, can be seen as "uncaring, cold, and calculating." The relationship between staff and the director can be superficial, and thus staff may have inaccurate or incomplete information about the director. Crowell

identified four areas where staff often have very different viewpoints than managers: (1) accountability, (2) the nature of power, (3) organizational decision-making and organizational change, and (4) job satisfaction. Each of these areas can be negatively impacted by the socially inhibited behavior of managers. For example, the increasing importance of accountability has resulted in more emphasis on staff record keeping and evaluation activities. However, administrators might neglect to inform and educate staff about the funding, policy, and legislative matters that drive this need for accountability. As a result, socially inhibited administrators may be perceived as distant figures handing down edicts about defining, counting, and evaluating services, and are likely to meet with resistance from staff.

In addition to accountability issues, the role of power plays an important role in how staff view and understand the behaviors of senior managers. Because staff often lack a conceptual framework for understanding organizational behavior, administrators can be perceived as having more power and information than is actually the case. One way that staff perceive power dynamics is that power is derived from how one is connected through the informal network of the organization. Staff who see their administrators as accessible are more likely to feel a sense of personal power and to have higher levels of job satisfaction than those who feel isolated and unconnected. Staff who do not have contact with administrators are more likely to see themselves as unappreciated, unrecognized, and unfairly treated in terms of allocation of resources, promotions, and job opportunities.

Crowell (1982) sees communications problems as central to problems with job satisfaction. She defines organizational communication as "the social process through which meaning is conveyed, energy is generated, power and authority are exercised, support and feedback are given, instructions are provided, conflict is resolved, and loyalty and a sense of mission are inculcated." As the distance between administrators and staff increases, communication becomes less frequent and more formal in nature. As a result, staff begin to lack a sense of control and feel alienated and unimportant. Administrators who tend toward socially inhibited behaviors may further compound this organizational tendency by neglecting to reach out to staff in more informal ways.

Staff members who recognize managers as having introverted or socially inhibited tendencies may find it beneficial to take the first step to reach out, rather than waiting for the manager to take the initiative. This is, of course, easier for other senior managers and colleagues to do than for subordinates to attempt, since the power relationship between superior and subordinate must be acknowledged. Still, staff can become aware of situa-

tions where introverted or socially inhibited behaviors are likely to occur (e.g., social events) and be prepared to reach out in a low-key way (e.g., initiating brief non-task-oriented conversations).

Staff can also informally take on the role of the advance person. Staff members who carry out this role are in a position to benefit by acquiring the managerial skills of intelligence gathering and relationship building, which are useful for further advancement up the managerial ladder. However, in order for this approach to be accepted and effective, staff also need to see it as benefiting the manager and the organization. This is akin to the idea of managing up, or that "helping the boss who, in turn, can help you" is a shared responsibility. Managing up is based on the assumption that one's boss is a human being who, like everyone else, may have significant limitations as well as strengths and whose management style needs to be understood and influenced (Austin, 1989).

As part of assessing the management style of an administrator, staff need to be able to recognize when their manager displays tendencies toward introverted or socially inhibited behaviors. Gabarro and Kotter (1980) identified two ways staff can assess a manager's communication style: (1) whether they prefer to get information by reading or by listening, and (2) whether they want a high level of day-to-day involvement with their staff, or whether they only want to be informed about problems and important changes. It is quite possible that the manager who prefers written communication and limited day-to-day involvement has introverted tendencies as well, and might benefit from the active involvement of staff who manage up.

Implications for organizational culture and structure. The organizational environment may also influence the tendencies of managers toward socially inhibited behaviors. One senior executive observed more introverted or inhibited staff behavior as the organization went through a difficult restructuring. Given that introverted behavior can be associated with unfamiliarity and ambiguity, it seems likely that more inhibited behavior would be observed in unstable organizations. Organizational size may impact such behavior as well, since the larger the organization, the more likely the manager will need to deal with inhibiting situations, such as meeting unfamiliar people and relating to large groups. In addition, the more specialized roles typically found in larger organizations may allow more introverted managers to find their niche.

The structure of authority in an organization may inhibit behavior as well. One senior manager noted that more introverted or inhibited behavior occurs in organizations that were "paternalistic," with a rigid, top-down chain of command. Organizations that promote a more democratic,

team-oriented culture may be more likely to draw out introverted or socially inhibited individuals. Zimbardo (1986) constructed an experimental situation in which subjects were assembled in problem-solving teams which were controlled by either autocratic rules, where priority was given to those who requested to talk first, or democratic rules, which attempted to equalize speaking opportunities. Under the democratic rules, moderately shy individuals talked more, were more influential, and were more likely to be thought of as leaders than under the autocratic rules.

In summary, socially inhibited behavior in managers can have a powerful negative impact on organizational communications, compounding the distance that often occurs between administrators and staff. This behavior can arise from situational or personality factors and, most likely, from a combination of the two. Managers who recognize these tendencies in themselves can employ a range of strategies, from finding a niche in the organization where introverted tendencies are appreciated, to involving a staff member to serve as an "advance person" to help them connect with staff and others. Staff who work for administrators with these tendencies can benefit from a better understanding of situational, personality, and organizational factors that contribute to these behaviors. Staff who understand this phenomenon may be more likely to take steps themselves to improve communications between themselves and their managers.

CONCLUSIONS

Identified are certain behaviors of managers that could be considered socially inhibited, as well as some of the possible origins and impacts of these behaviors. These behaviors appear to be elicited by a variety of situational factors and can be linked to the concept of introversion. Managers with tendencies to behave in socially inhibited ways may be well suited for certain management roles; however, these behaviors may also cause problems in the workplace by compounding the distance between administrators and staff. A variety of strategies have been suggested for managers who have these tendencies and for the staff that work with them.

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