Thought Assignment: Power and Proximity

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In this paper we intend to illustrate the ways that physical distance affects the relationship between referent power, managing, and motivation within the context of COVID-19. Referent power is a function of interpersonal skills and an individual's ability to inspire trust, respect, and devotion from others. This influence, however, is most effective in person and challenges arise when leaders try to motivate through remote means. Organizations across the world experienced these limitations when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Managers and employees alike struggled to adapt to an online workforce as communication and other forms of interaction became strained by the newfound realities of remote collaboration. Workplace bonding became practically non-existent as offices were left empty and motivation, in many cases, was low. In general, workers want to contribute to an organization that has a purpose and to believe that their labour has meaning beyond only a paycheck. When a leader can communicate their organization's vision in a way that resonates with staff, they create a sense of belonging and purpose. A key factor in managers unlocking the potential of their employees' motivation, therefore, is one of physical distance.

Referent Power and Centrality

This relationship can first be demonstrated through the relation between referent power and networks and centrality. Social networks are an integral element in the workplace because these network interactions develop referent power relationships through the trust built between members within the group. In return, this creates centrality surrounding the person or persons of referent power on the grounds that employees depend on the individuals with referent power to

communicate information properly. In most situations, these individuals tend to be managers or selected leaders. The responsibility of these people is to create motivation using their referent power and centrality in order for the organization to run smoothly and effectively.

Before COVID-19 transformed the workplace, employees were working in close proximity with one another. This gave employees the ability to form strong social networks, considering that people could have face-to-face interactions. In-person social networks in the workplace encouraged regular interpersonal exchanges that served to build the foundations of a manager's identity in the eyes of employees. A charismatic manager could quickly gain respect and establish strong relationships with coworkers in these settings. Communication in-person is also more effective than online, and information being transferred directly between manager and employee is less likely to be lost or misunderstood. In environments where communication between employees and manager is clear and concise, the manager has increased centrality. This can in turn lead to increased referent power because a manager who is able to reach employees effectively and communicate their vision further influences the employees.

We can compare this to the new-normal pandemic era, where many organizations have moved to online collaboration tools. In this novel setting, social networks are less evident due to the increased distance between one another. Communication gets interrupted or distorted at this distance since information frequently gets passed between individuals through emails and text messages. The direct line of communication is no longer apparent when work is online. The consequence from this is the opposite of what happened when workplaces were in person. Essentially, the cycle between communication, referent power, and centrality is

reversed and in the end the manager has weakened centrality and referent power. These ideas are further reinforced by concepts of manager roles and the ways in which managers can motivate through interpersonal skills in an organization.

<div align="center">Charismatic Management</div>

How does a manager motivate through referent power? To paraphrase Henry Minztberg's article, *The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact*, the literature of management has always recognized the leadership role, particularly those aspects of it related to motivation. Managers spend an average of 78% of their time in oral communication, motivating and encouraging employees by reconciling their individual needs with the goals of the organization. It is reasonable to assume then, that effective managers must have highly developed interpersonal skills: an extension of referent power. If a manager were lacking in referent power, it would undermine an organization's efficiency since managers act as verbal liaisons and facilitators of corporate networks. As operators of these social hubs, managers need their interpersonal skills to be effective because only 13% of communication from forms like mail is considered useful by CEOs (Mintzberg, 1990). Therefore, there is evidence of a direct relationship between referent power and proximity, even more exemplified by the challenges brought on by COVID-19.

<div align="center">Referent Motivation and Distance</div>

There also exists a relationship between a manager's charisma and employee motivation, and this relationship can be affected significantly by lack of proximity. Referent power, at its very core definition, is described as the desire that an individual feels to establish a "oneness" with a figure they admire or respect (French & Raven, 1959). The capability for a charismatic

manager to influence their employees comes directly from this desire for the employees to associate themselves closely with the manager. This desire describes a type of employee motivator based on the influence of a referent figure. It has been shown that referent motivation leads to employee behaviours that are in accordance with the perceived characteristics of the referent agent, or manager in this case (Collins et al., 2003). In essence, employees are motivated to replicate behaviours and characteristics of those they admire and respect. In the context of remote work, a manager's ability to display their characteristics and gain respect through charisma or other traits is severely diminished. In *Distance Matters*, Olson & Olson (2000) describe several key characteristics of in-person, synchronous work environments that are difficult to reproduce in a remote setting. One of these characteristics is "shared local context" which essentially encapsulates the fact that it is easier to relate and understand those who are experiencing similar things, at the same times as you are. Without this ease of relation, employees can easily lose or fail to establish any referent motivation they may otherwise have experienced from a charismatic manager.

The growing trend towards decentralized work environments may affect not only the amount of motivation employees have to contribute to an organization, but also the factors contributing to their motivation. It has been found that feelings of psychological isolation caused by remote work can negatively impact an employee's relationships within a network and lead to decreased commitment to the organization. Employees who find themselves in this situation may be motivated primarily by short term benefits such as financial compensation or time off, as opposed to long term investment in the vision and goals of the organization (Wang et al.,

2019). The sense of isolation in remote work settings is common and can cause lasting damage to the relationship between a manager and their employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adapt and change on an unprecedented global scale. Among these changes has been the mass migration to remote work and online collaboration in many organizations. The rushed and unanticipated nature of this migration has illustrated how crucial interpersonal relationships within organizations are. We are realizing through this process that the daily micro-interactions and nuances in communication that are only possible in person contribute to essential relationships of power and respect that promote motivation on a large scale. The loss of these capabilities through decreased proximity has severely damaged a manager's ability to establish centrality and referent power amongst employees. Managers also had to overcome communication obstacles that might have led to the loss of their central position or the loss of social network relationships with their employees. We argue that these significant damages to a manager's perception can potentially decrease motivation of the many employees working from home during this global event.

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