Tension at the Top: Status and Leadership

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Updated on 23rd September 2024



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If there's one thing that often derails a successful leadership career, it's the siren call of status. At a certain level of career advancement, people stop being motivated as much by money. Regardless of the salary they reach though, they never stop being motivated by status. The more you have, the more you have to lose – the reference point is constantly shifting. At the highest levels of leadership, this creates an inevitable recipe for status plays, power moves and all the unpleasant parts of office politics.

The problem is that this change in orientation can often

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happen unbeknownst to leaders. Rather than being across the shift in their own motivations (and the people around them), it is easy to fall into patterns of dysfunctional partnering and poor self-regulation. Leaders must be aware of this powerful component of the management psyche.

Playing the Game

Max Weber, the renowned sociologist, said that society is stratified in three ways: by class, power and status. The first two are obvious – money and power are things we encounter constantly and clearly. Status can be a bit more amorphous. Status is highly socially determined (and relative) and can attach to any number of particular professions, characteristics or identities.

Despite this, desire for status is a fundamental motivation across cultures and groups. We see it come up in social groups everywhere. From high school to the C-suite, it's a part of human life. Undoubtedly, status is underpinned by comparison. Humans love comparing themselves to each other. Research has found that up to 10% of our thinking can relate to comparisons. And leaders are no exception when it comes to this obsession to see ourselves in relation to others.

Whether or not you entertain this way of thinking, office politics will exist. For any aspiring leader, status is something to be contended with in oneself and one's peers. So, how can you navigate this?

Your Next Move

There are a number of factors to keep in mind as you find yourself enmeshed in status plays at work:

1. **Acknowledge (don't judge) your motivations**

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The fact that status plays a role in your motivations is not something to be ashamed of. As noted above, status is fundamental. The social nature of human animals means it is something we all must come to terms with. But the sooner we confront it face on, the sooner we can begin to navigate how we respond.

2. **Observe where status comes into play for yourself**

Like any movement of self-development, our first step is awareness. What does status mean to us? Not just in our values (i.e. how we profess to relate to status), but in our body and our everyday (i.e. how we are showing up in relation to status). Through observing ourselves, we might be surprised to find what triggers status considerations. Ask: What do we associate with status? When do we fall into comparisons? Where do we get threatened? Who makes us feel intimidated?

3. **Observe where status comes into play for your peers**

Titles are one obvious example, but status comes up in a myriad of different ways for different people. For example, we often see that in organisations moving to flatter, more Agile configurations, loss of perceived status can cause considerable upheaval for leaders. From being challenged on our views to who gets the corner office, status pops up in a variety of places. The challenge for you is to notice where it's uniquely coming up for the people you are working with.

4. **De-status-ify (or don't)**

There are a number of ways you can remove the threat to status from a situation or experience – both for yourself and for others. We do this all the time when we tell ourselves that "it's not a competition" or "everyone is running their own race." Sometimes you might even want to bring status into play more to motivate yourself or others in certain ways! Start to be mindful in how you can frame a situation to neutralise status

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implications.

Confronting status front on is important for leaders as they scale the leadership hierarchy. Greater awareness of this motivator (and destabilizer) can allow us to be more purposeful and effective.

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