[Superior + Subordinate] or [Superior – Subordinate]: A Case Study

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Abstract

The relationship between a superior and his or her subordinate is arguably the most important relationship in an organization. The communication that forms the superior-subordinate relationship, the problems inherent in this type of interaction, the involvement of coworkers in the creation of this relationship, and how these issues affect the work environment are all examined and applied to an organizational case study, intended for use in classrooms or organizational training programs.
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Introduction

Every individual in every organization is involved in a superior-subordinate relationship. It is arguably the most important interaction that takes place within an organization. This relationship is not only influenced by the context it is embedded within, but it also acts back on this context to create the reality of the situation. While this relationship can sometimes be beneficial for both members, it is unfortunately more often a source of frustration and conflict.

Organizational communication scholars have begun to use this relationship as a unit of analysis in their studies. Researchers are interested in the communication that takes place in these relationships and its influence on organizational effectiveness. The problems that are inherent between superiors and subordinates have also gained the attention of researchers and practitioners alike. When troubles arise in this relationship, often employees turn to their coworkers for comfort and support. The communication that occurs on this level has an effect back on the overall superior-subordinate relationship. Finally, the idea of whether or not superiors should promote a fun work environment for their subordinates has recently become an avenue for organizational researchers. A brief review of the relevant literature will be given before applying this knowledge to an organizational case study. The case study method has proven to be an effective tool for scholars and practitioners alike trying to gain a better understanding of this unique relationship.

Literature Review

Superior-Subordinate Relationship as a Unit of Analysis

Measuring an organization’s effectiveness is imperative for both researchers and practitioners. In recent years, as the relationship between a superior and his or her subordinate
has come into the spotlight, researchers have become increasingly interested in this relationship. Krantz (1989) stressed the importance of this “managerial couple” and suggested its use as a unit of analysis in the study of organizations and their effectiveness. “To appreciate the managerial couple in context as a systemic process, an understanding of the impact of the social and technical subsystems is necessary to explore the couple’s experience” (Krantz, 1989, p. 173). He stressed the importance of studying the different forces that shape this couple – individual, interpersonal (dyadic), intragroup, intergroup, and organizational.

By exploring the individual worlds of each member of this couple and then applying these inner dimensions to their interpersonal relationship, a better understanding of the dynamics that exist between the individuals can be achieved. “Those involved must confront inner conflicts associated with issues of independence and dependence, rivalry, giving and getting, controlling and being controlled, competing and cooperating, success, failure, evaluation, trust and accountability, sharing, mutual recognition of differences, etc.” (Krantz, 1989, p. 165). The next level that this couple functions at is the intragroup level. Here, not only are superiors and subordinates dealing with their own dynamics and interrelations, they are now subjected to those of the group context in which they are involved. This intragroup level is paralleled by an intergroup level, where the individuals in the relationship represent other types of groups within the organization. For example, the superior would represent the management group, while the subordinate would symbolize the employees. The historical intergroup relationships that already exist will be enacted within the relationship of the managerial couple. Lastly, the couple is embedded within the formal organization. As Krantz concludes, “People use their work roles to manage their anxieties and meet other socio-emotional needs as well as to satisfy their needs to accomplish work alone. Thus the irrational dimensions of life are brought into the workplace
and find expression in social relations” (p. 170). These irrational bonds shape the couple through the structures represented by the organization and the structure inherent in the relationship (the authority boundary). The study of all of these levels is imperative for the comprehension of the superior-subordinate relationship. However, these levels do not simply exist, they are created through the communication that occurs in the relationship.

*Communication in the Superior-Subordinate Relationship*

Lee and Jablin (1995) were interested in the maintenance communication used by superiors and subordinates in their work relationships. The authors identified three strategic maintenance situations – deteriorating, routine, and escalating. They found that in almost half of the situations that were identified, the situation was classified as deteriorating, about 25% were routine situations, and the other 25% were classified as escalating. It is evident by these results that superiors and subordinates were most aware of situations in which they were concerned that their relationship with the other person might deteriorate to a level that they were not comfortable with or ready for. The researchers also explored the quality of the relationship exchange between superiors and subordinates since past research had found this “to affect turnover, productivity, satisfaction, leader support, attention and sensitivity, agreement over the severity of job problems, and related variables” (p. 224). The results of this inquiry differed for superiors and subordinates. Superiors reported no effect caused by perceptions of relationship exchange quality on their use of maintenance communication strategies in the strategic situations. It appeared that most superiors tried to be consistent in their leadership styles with all of their employees. Subordinates, on the other hand, did report using different maintenance strategies depending on the quality of relationship exchange with their supervisor. Those who
had in-group exchanges with their superiors tended to create more of a closeness and used less deception/distortion than did out-group members.

It has also been found that superior-subordinate relationships are maintained through the use of politeness strategies and information inquiry. Morand (2000), calling upon the social constructionist view of organizations, stressed the importance of the use of language in shaping this relationship. Using politeness theory to study the use of language in organizations, he found that “subordinates generate more polite speech when performing a conversational act that may infringe or otherwise threaten a superior’s face” (p. 241). The use of politeness in the superior-subordinate relationship is an indicator of how organizational roles are continually reproduced. When power is brought into this equation, one can gain an understanding of how language is used to enact the power differentials in this type of relationship. Only by reducing these power differentials can a superior gain the involvement and participation of his or her subordinates.

Communication in this relationship can also be analyzed through an understanding of a superior’s leadership style. Madzar (2001) studied the way this leadership style affected subordinates’ information inquiry. Information seeking is an integral part of the superior-subordinate relationship and is imperative to maintaining the well-being of the organization. The researcher used two conceptual frameworks to study leadership style – transformational and transactional leaders. Transformational leaders used self-reinforcement to motivate their subordinates and they worked to align their subordinate’s goals with their own to create performance beyond expectation. They demonstrated charisma, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Transactional leaders, on the other hand, based their relationships on their own control of the situation and the interactions that took place. They often remained quiet as long as their subordinate was meeting the performance standards. Transactional leadership
had its foundations in contingent rewards and management-by-exception (the attitude reflected by “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”). Madzar found that leadership style did emerge as a significant influence on all types of information inquiry. Transformational leaders enhanced their subordinates’ proactivity, as predicted, above and beyond their transactional counterparts.

Taking a broader view of maintenance communication used in superior-subordinate relationships, Glaser and Eblen (1986) discussed superior’s organizational communication effectiveness from a manager’s standpoint. Superiors in the study identified six dimensions of effectiveness: coaching and motivating employees, encouraging worker involvement and participation, self-motivation, problem solving ability, direct and adaptive interpersonal style, and listening skills. All of these dimensions were seen as important predictors of their competence as superiors. These were also acknowledged as an effective means of establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with their subordinates.

Problems in Superior-Subordinate Relationships

Considering all the weight that is placed on a superior-subordinate relationship, problems inevitably arise. Four dimensions of superior-subordinate communication were identified by Miles, Patrick, & King (1996). Positive relationship communication focused on superiors seeking and being open to feedback from subordinates, showing an interest in them as people, being able to relate to them in a casual manner, and allowing them to take part in decision making processes. Upward openness communication was displayed by subordinates who feel comfortable with questioning a superior’s instructions and being able to disagree with his or her superior. Negative relationship communication was characterized by a superior ridiculing and criticizing subordinates. Lastly, job-relevant communication included job instructions, information about rules and policies, and supervisor’s feedback on performance. Miles, et al.
were interested in how the use of these different dimensions of communication affected job satisfaction for employees at different job levels. On a broad scale, they found that “communication with one’s superior was a significant predictor of job satisfaction irrespective of job level” (p. 287). More specifically, in terms of hourly employees, they found that all four dimensions of communication with one’s superior were significant predictors of job satisfaction. For the intermediate level between hourly employees and superiors, which Miles, et al. labeled “supervisors,” positive relationship communication and upward openness communication were not found to be significant predictors of job satisfaction. Interestingly enough, these employees did report receiving these two types of communication from their superiors more frequently than hourly employees, suggesting that superiors treat subordinates differently based on their job level. This fact has serious implications for the study of superior-subordinate relationships in that problems are bound to arise when subordinates do not feel they are being treated fairly.

The types of collusive relationships that can occur between superiors and subordinates were studied by Kets de Vries (1999). He identified four main types of interaction patterns that could emerge in this relationship – the narcissistic, the controlling, the paranoid, and the sadomasochistic. The first type, narcissistic, was found in more than half of collusive arrangements. Narcissists can be described as people who are preoccupied with wanting to be superior, experiencing a sense of uniqueness, exaggerating their talents, and engaging in boastful and pretentious behavior. This type of relationship occurs when subordinates are in a one-down position and are especially needy and submissive. The second type of collusion is controlling. This was the next most common type found in the interviews. Here, individuals want to master and control everything and everyone around them. Subordinates in these relationships can either be overly submissive, passive-aggressive, or dependent. A paranoid collusion is the third type
and the next most frequent pattern found. Here, executives believe that the world is a very
dangerous place, full of imminent danger. They are hypervigilant and overly concerned about
others’ hidden motives and intentions, which often leads to distorted perceptions, thoughts, and
memories. This relationship with a subordinate can lead he or she to also have a paranoid
outlook or they play along out of frustrated dependency. The last type of collusion is
sadomasochistic. Executives, who are sadist in nature, behave aggressively and frighten others
into submission. To retain the upper hand and to be in power takes precedence over everything
else. Masochists, on the other hand, are self-demeaning and believe themselves to be worthless.
Sadists, when paired with a masochist subordinate, create a collusive relationship. All four of
these interaction patterns are obviously problematic for both individuals involved and need to be
identified and ended before they can create severe organizational repercussions.

Coworker Communication Concerning Superior-Subordinate Relationships

The communication that occurs between coworkers in regard to their respective
superiors is an important aspect of the organizational context. Carless, Mann, & Wearing (1998)
examined the strength of agreement between the following dyads in their ratings of managers: (a)
pairs of subordinates; (b) superior and subordinate; (c) manager (self) and subordinate; and (d)
manager and superior. They found, as predicted, that the strongest agreement existed between
two subordinates. Agreement between subordinates was significantly greater than the agreement
between the other dyads studied. This finding is reasonable since it is assumed that subordinates
would have more opportunities to observe similar behaviors and share perceptions of their
superior. An implication of this research would be the benefit for superiors in receiving
feedback from their subordinates to help improve performance and foster better relationships.
In a similar vein, yet also referring back to the previous section where problematic superior-subordinate relationships were discussed, Sias and Jablin (1995) were interested in coworker communication and the extent to which this communication was affected by perceived differential superior-subordinate treatment. They found that subordinates tended to determine whether or not differential treatment was perceived as fair, either through an internal process or through communication with coworkers. Their findings suggested that “evaluations regarding the fairness of differential treatment are often socially constructed by coworkers through communication” (p. 30). Fairness was also evaluated through the use of other standards, such as group or organizational norms/rules and moral standards. If the treatment was found to be fair, little or not coworker communication occurred. However, if it was determined that the treatment was unfair, coworkers were more likely to engage in conversations with one another. Unfair incidents created a need for coworkers to seek or give advice, seek or give support, and initiate a process of sense making. Sias and Jalin also found that subordinates who had low-quality relationships with their superiors reported more incidents of differential treatment and more conversations regarding differential treatment. They also showed a tendency to perceive differential treatment as unfair and to report more negative, rather than positive, differential treatment incidents. These findings demonstrate that not only is the communication that occurs between superiors and subordinates important but also of interest is the communication about the relationship that happens between coworkers.

Should Superiors Encourage a Fun Work Environment for Their Subordinates?

Environment can play a huge factor in the superior-subordinate relationship. The idea of creating a fun work environment, its component characteristics, and its advantages for employees, work teams, and organizations was the main interest of Ford, McLaughlin, &
Newstrom (2003) in their study of human resource managers. They found that three-fourths of managers thought their employees were having less fun at work than they should. Respondents believed that a fun work environment had a positive impact for the organization by improving advantageous outcomes and a lesser, but still positive, effect on disadvantageous outcomes. Managers believed that fun at work led to a number of beneficial outcomes, such as a greater ability to attract new employees, improved turnover and absenteeism, better communication among employees, greater employee commitment to the organization, improved organizational culture, and an increase in customer satisfaction. Results also indicated that there were many advantages and few disadvantages for employees in having a fun work environment. There was more than a 90 percent agreement between managers that a fun work environment led to increased employee enthusiasm, group cohesiveness, and employee satisfaction. It was also associated with employee creativity and friendships at work. In terms of the factors that inhibited the creation of a fun work environment, the participants could be divided into two groups. The first group reflected a managerial fear that having a fun work environment would lead to productivity loss, create dangerous situations, or produce unnecessary costs. The second group reflected a fear that having a fun work environment would be seen by others as somehow unprofessional or be personally embarrassing. Most participants felt that it was the responsibility of top managers or the corporate culture to create a fun work environment. Overall, it was concluded that “a fun work environment is good for the organization, the work team, and the individual employee and should be strongly encouraged and supported by management at all organizational levels” (p. 31).
Case Study Method as Effective Pedagogy

Reviewing the literature that has been discussed, one cannot help wonder – what is the best way to teach students and organizational members about this type of organizational relationship? The answer may lie in case studies. Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak (2004) defined cases as “examples or illustrations of organizational problems or challenges… By itself, a case is a good story” (p. 5). A case is studied and used as a learning experience when a student is able to apply a theoretical basis to the case to arrive at the best outcomes for solving the problems presented. These organizational researchers promoted the use of case studies as an effective teaching and training tool. “Case studies allow students the opportunities to analyze critical incidents, translate their knowledge into practical applications, and develop strategies for their own organizational communication practice” (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2004, p. 1).

Through the discussion of case studies among students or trainees in an educational setting, participants are encouraged to learn both independently and interdependently. Seeing as a case can be interpreted and understood through a variety of perspectives, participants are given the opportunity to analyze organizational concepts and situations from many different angles, fostering intellectual growth and providing a background of experiences from which they can later draw upon.

By using cases in the study of organizational communication, students are given a preview of how communication is practiced in organizations and the communication situations and dilemmas they may one day encounter in their own work experience. Cases will test their “analytical reflection, theoretical analysis, problem analysis, generation of alternative solutions, and solution selection abilities” (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2004, p. 7). To this end, case studies integrate both theoretical and practical knowledge through their complex and realistic
Superior-Subordinate

depictions of communication phenomenon that exist in organizations. Current organizational members that are using case studies as a training tool can apply their own experience and knowledge of the organization to the particular case they are examining. Their unique perspective on the situation can serve a dual purpose - as an opportunity to view their own organizational context in a new light and to help other trainees envision the case from a realistic perspective. Case studies can serve as an effective tool for both students and trainees looking to develop their organizational communication skills.

Brewer (1971) advocated for the use of case studies as, not only a learning device but also, a research tool. In regard to the use of cases to achieve theoretical purposes, he stated, “They provide direct tests of the propositions in theories of organizational structure which refer to internal social processes and thereby provide indirect tests of the structural propositions in these theories as well” (p. 476). By analyzing cases for their formal structural characteristics and comparing cases with others of the same nature, assumptions about intervening internal processes can be made explicit. Furthermore, comparing case studies can “lead to explicit differential predictions about the nature of internal social processes under the different structural conditions” (p. 476).

Using Case Studies to Examine Superior-Subordinate Relationships

Brewer (1971) used cases to study the flow of hierarchical communications in formal organizations and how this flow affected authority structures. In this same vein, the following case study examines superior-subordinate relationships in the organization and how these relationships are influenced by communication. The case study method provides an excellent avenue for studying these relationships due to its realistic nature but also its flexibility in allowing the reader to take both an observer and participant role. Students and trainees who use
case studies are able to stand back from a situation to observe the total context of the actions and behaviors of those involved. However, they are also given the opportunity to assume the role of participant in the situation, due to a case’s development of a decision-making situation. This idea of first person clarity and third person objectivity is perfect for the study of superior-subordinate relationships since every student who becomes part of an organization one day will be involved in this type of relationship and, unfortunately, these are often wrought with difficulties and problems. By allowing the study of these relationships from this perspective, students can become equipped with ways to handle problems without their job being put on the line. In a similar vein, current organizational members can practice and develop new ways of dealing with sensitive and possibly risky situations without any fear of repercussions.

To examine the intricacies involved in a superior-subordinate relationship and take advantage of the pedagogical tool discussed above, the case study “[Superior + Subordinate] or [Superior – Subordinate]” is presented. The following case conveys the problems that one subordinate had with a superior. The case study is able to tie in some of the issues discussed in the above literature and examines the effect that some of these conditions can have in an office. An outline of the case (Appendix A) is included to provide a quick overview of the case and organize the main ideas in a logical fashion. Also included are supplementary materials for teachers and trainers, including an abstract, learning objectives, key terms and concepts, key players, and discussion questions (Appendix B).
Case Study

“[Superior + Subordinate] or [Superior – Subordinate]”

First Week Uneasiness

“Well, I survived my first week,” Selma Collins said to herself, as she sighed and leaned back in her new desk chair at 5 p.m. on Friday evening. Selma had recently been hired as the Receptionist/Typist in the Human Resources office of a small, private college near her home. She closed her eyes and started to think about the week – all the new faces, getting used to her new surroundings, her unclear job description, her new supervisor, Cathy – when Mary’s voice suddenly startled her out of these thoughts. “Hey! What are you still doing here? Come on, it’s 5:00 – let’s get out of here!”

Mary was the other woman who worked in the front office with Selma. Mary Mungy was 40, the same age as Selma, and had been working in HR for the past three years. She was introduced as the HR Assistant for Recruitment, which meant that she input all the resumes that came into the office, but it was clear immediately that she did much more than just this. Selma had liked Mary immediately and could tell that they would be good friends. Their children were about the same age, their husbands had grown up in the same neighborhood in the Bronx, and Mary seemed to have the same wariness about Cathy that Selma did. She smiled as she began gathering her coat and purse and doing another check to make sure that she had followed proper office protocol for closing up for the day. Everyone else in the office had gone home already, which Selma thought was strange since they all complained about how much work they always had to do, but she shrugged off the thought, turned off the lights, and headed to her car with Mary.
Upon arriving home after battling traffic and other weary workers, Selma was relieved to find her husband, Mike, had returned from his business trip. He had been gone all week and was eager to hear every detail about his wife’s new position. However, Mike did not find her in the good spirits that he had hoped he would. As they sat down together for a glass of wine before dinner, Selma began to tell him about her week. She told him about Mary and her other new coworkers, who seemed nice, for the most part. She also explained some of the office set-up and what the campus was like. However, she didn’t delay long in telling Mike about her new supervisor, Cathy Watch, the director of Human Resources.

She began with her first day, in which Cathy had given her a quick ten-minute overview of the office and introduced her to the other staff first thing in the morning. Yet, she then proceeded to be in and out of the office all day, always saying that she wouldn’t have time to sit down with Selma till later. However, “later” never came. Luckily, Mary had started to show her the ropes of the office and had helped her set up her desk and things. The next day went along in much the same way, with Cathy never having time for Selma, although she was often in her office with her door closed. Selma was able to obtain a copy of her job description from Mary’s files so that she had some idea what she would be doing there.

As she got to know the other coworkers and get a sense for the climate of the office, she began to realize that this was normal procedure for Cathy with new workers. She often let new employees “sink or swim” and the others informed Selma that she would never receive much support from Cathy. Selma had been surprised at the openness of the other employees in sharing this information with her but it seemed as if Cathy was often the subject of discussions in the office. While Cathy’s subordinates appeared to openly discuss her while she was out of the office, their attitudes and the general climate quickly changed whenever Cathy walked back
through the door. It seemed as if the other employees were intimidated by Cathy and things were stressed and heavy with tension whenever she was in the office.

As Selma finished her recap of the week, she looked up to see a worried expression on her husband’s face. She had been out of work a long time with the kids and her last job before leaving the workforce had been so great, that he was concerned nothing would ever live up to it. Selma was also rather impulsive and had taken the job without giving it much thought. She often acted without thinking, which sometimes worried Mike, who was very rational and logical about all the decisions he made. “What?” asked Selma. “It’s just a bad first week. I’m sure things will get better.” Mike chose his words carefully so as not to further upset his wife. “Maybe you’re just not ready to go back to work yet. Or this might not be the right job for you. I’m just worried about you, honey.” She assured him that she appreciated his concern but that it would just take some getting used to. The timer rang signaling that dinner was done, so they called the kids to come downstairs and Selma was glad to not think about her new job for a while.

Growing Uneasiness and Growing Friendships

The next few months were a blur. Selma had been hired right at the end of the summer and the beginning of the school year was always the office’s busiest time. After having been pretty much thrown into the sharks and receiving no help from Cathy, she thanked her lucky stars that Mary had been such a big help. They were growing closer by the day, not only through work but also through disclosing personal information. They had many inside jokes and had even started to get together on the weekends.

Cathy was often the topic of their grumblings about the office. Their list of grievances appeared endless. She lacked any kind of effective communication skills. Instead of
establishing healthy, positive relationships with her subordinates, she used intimidation to get them to do what she wanted, due to her own fear and insecurity in her position. She was only 45 years old and to already have such a high position at the college was a testament to her many years of persistence and “aggressiveness,” as others often saw it. Cathy liked to believe it had to do with her hard work and she knew she had given up much in the pursuit of her career aspirations. Also due in part to this insecurity, Cathy did not practice participative management and seldom asked for her employees’ input in terms of decision making and problem solving, even when the situation directly involved them. She was extremely moody – one minute she would be smiling and pleasant but the next she would bark out an order and storm back into her office. Cathy treated each of her subordinates very differently and obviously had her favorites among the upper level staff. Hourly employees, like Selma and Mary, often felt pushed aside and unimportant.

Cathy was a rigid perfectionist that was obsessed with punctuality, orderliness, and meticulousness. One of her biggest concerns was that the office appear professional at all times and, therefore, she did not allow any “fun” to take place at work. This was one of Selma and Mary’s main frustrations. They were both light-hearted, fun-loving individuals who had enjoyed the benefits of a fun work environment at their previous jobs. The stiffness and restrictive atmosphere that was caused by Cathy’s many unspoken rules placed a heavy cloud over the whole office. Even employees in other offices on campus knew of Cathy’s poor managerial and communication skills. It seemed as if Selma had really picked the wrong office to work in!

Even though Cathy had problems effectively communicating most of the time, she made it clear that she did not like Selma and Mary’s growing friendship. She often commented, “My! You girls seem awfully close!” Hence, they had learned to keep their discussions to a whisper
and to hide their schoolgirl giggles. The whole office could sense Cathy’s insecurity about what the subordinate’s thought of her and her attempts at trying to control them were blatantly obvious. First were her not-so-subtle comments about how often they chatted. When that didn’t seem to have an effect, she rearranged the front office so that Selma and Mary’s backs faced each other. When even that proved a futile attempt (and an obvious inconvenience in terms of customer service), Cathy decided something more drastic needed to be done.

**Uneasiness Hits Its Peak**

Selma’s six-month probationary period was to be up on Friday and this signaled the time for her probationary review by Cathy. Selma had been nervous all week for the review, knowing full well her poor relationship with Cathy. Selma couldn’t imagine that the problem was her, since she had such a wonderful relationship with her last supervisor. Her coworkers assured her it was not. Also on Selma’s mind was Cathy’s continuing disapproval of the atmosphere she and Mary had created in the front office. Cathy had waited until late Friday afternoon to schedule their appointment, surely only to prolong Selma’s anxiety.

When Cathy finally called Selma into her office, Selma was taken aback by Cathy’s pleasantness and warmth. Seeing a side of Cathy that she had never experienced before, Selma was initially wary but soon began to feel more comfortable with Cathy than she had since their initial interview over six months ago. They discussed Selma’s work, her telephone manner, her interactions with the employees of the college, and comments that had been made by the Assistant Vice President of Human Resources, all of which Cathy appeared pleased with. Selma realized that she had gotten worked up over nothing and began to think that maybe she had the wrong impression of Cathy. She left the meeting feeling upbeat and was in a very good mood as
she discussed the details of the meeting with Mary, who had been anxiously waiting to hear of what had happened.

Both women were a bit surprised when Cathy summoned Mary to her office right at the end of the day but Selma ensured her that Cathy was in an extremely good mood and she had nothing to worry about. Mary told Selma not to wait for her and to get home to Mike, who had also been awaiting the news of Selma’s meeting. Selma told Mary to call her over the weekend to let her know how everything went.

When Mary entered Cathy’s office, Cathy had a serious expression on her face and any traces of a previous good mood were gone now. Mary laughed to herself figuring it was just her luck. Cathy asked her to sit down and got right to business. She informed Mary that Selma had disclosed to her that Mary made too many personal calls on the company’s time and used the company’s long-distance billing code. Mary was shocked by this news and expressed this sentiment very openly to Cathy. Cathy, likewise, admitted her surprise at the disclosure by Selma, since she knew of she and Mary’s close relationship. She stated that she had wanted to hear Mary’s side of the story before jumping to any conclusions. Mary insisted that she only spoke to her children and husband once a day and never made long-distance phone calls. Cathy assured Mary that she believed her, since they had never had a problem with this in the past three years. As a confused and upset Mary left her office, Cathy offhandedly mentioned that perhaps Selma was jealous of Mary’s position in the organization and was trying to use this to get back at her. Mary thanked Cathy for the warning and went home to think.
Selma thought it was strange that she had not heard from Mary all weekend and was eager to speak with her on Monday morning. Upon arriving at the office, Mary, who had spent the whole weekend analyzing every detail of her friendship with Selma, was curt and distant. She had decided that if Selma had intended to get close to her only to use her, that she would simply cut off the friendship and ignore her. Selma, surprised by Mary’s uncharacteristic demeanor, tried to make their usual small talk and even alluded to their inside jokes but was brutally rebuffed. Mary wasn’t the only one in an unusual mood – Cathy appeared to be jolly and chipper, something no one imagined was possible.

Sensing that something had occurred at Friday afternoon’s meeting, Selma was finally able to corner Mary and ask what had happened. Mary tersely responded that Cathy had informed her of Selma’s complaint and that the “problem” had been taken care of. When Selma asked in surprise what complaint Mary referred to, Mary, trying to restrain her emotions, quietly stated, “I thought we were friends. How could you do that to me?” Mary turned away to hide the tears in her eyes but Selma jumped up from her chair and moved to the other side of the office. She pleadingly assured Mary that she had no idea what she was talking about and asked her to explain further. Mary, recognizing the honesty in her friend’s eyes, told her about the meeting she had with Cathy and the information that had been divulged. As Mary told her the story, Selma grew more and more infuriated, until she had to grab onto the desk because she was seeing dots. Mary realized, at about the same time that Selma did, what had happened. Yet before she could stop her, Selma had taken off down the hallway to Cathy’s office…
Summary

The superior-subordinate relationship is an extremely important topic in the study of organizational communication. Researchers, practitioners, and students, alike, can benefit from acknowledging the complexities of this relationship and understanding the different dynamics that combine to form its interaction patterns over time. The communication that forms the superior-subordinate relationship, the problems inherent in this type of interaction, the involvement of coworkers in the creation of this relationship, and how these issues affect the work environment were all examined through the use of an organizational case study. The case study approach is an effective pedagogical tool for use in the classroom or training program. Students and trainees find the case study approach to be useful, especially when studying a high risk situation such as superior-subordinate relationships. Everyone can benefit from learning more about this important and sensitive organizational relationship.
References


APPENDIX A

CASE STUDY OUTLINE
“[Superior + Subordinate] or [Superior – Subordinate]”

I. First Week Uneasiness
   A. Selma’s confusion
      1. New faces
      2. New surroundings
      3. Unclear job description
      4. New supervisor, Cathy
   B. Coworker, Mary, brings a sense of comfort
   C. Selma’s husband, Mike, is worried
      1. Is Selma ready to go back to work yet?
      2. Can anything live up to her last job?
      3. Is this the right job for her?

II. Growing Uneasiness and Growing Friendships
   A. Problems with Cathy
      1. No communication skills
      2. Uses intimidation to gain compliance from her subordinates
      3. Does not believe in participative management
      4. Moody
      5. Differential treatment of subordinates
      6. Controlling
      7. No fun allowed
   B. Selma and Mary grow closer
      1. Cathy’s attempts to separate them
         a. Comments
         b. Rearrange the office
      2. Nothing seems to work

III. Uneasiness Hits Its Peak
   A. Selma’s six-month probationary review causes worry
      1. Poor relationship with Cathy
      2. Cathy’s disapproval of her friendship with Mary
   B. Cathy’s change in mood toward Selma
   C. Mary’s unexpected meeting with Cathy
      1. Cathy explains Selma’s “disclosure” to her
      2. Mary’s assurance that it is not true

IV. Uneasiness is Taken to a Whole New Level
   A. Mary is hurt and upset by her meeting with Cathy
   B. Selma is confused by Mary’s distance
   C. Mary tells Selma what happened
   D. Both realize that Cathy purposely lied to Mary
   E. Selma goes to confront Cathy
APPENDIX B

SUPPORTING MATERIAL
**Learning Objectives:**
1. To become aware of the difficulties that are inherent in the superior-subordinate relationship and apply this knowledge to the current situation.
2. To understand the problems caused by poor managerial communication skills.
3. To evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of coworker communication.
4. To understand that there can be a balance between having a fun work environment and maintaining professionalism and to apply that balance when appropriate.

**Case Study Abstract:**
Selma Collins has just started her new job in the Human Resources department of a small, private college. She is initially confused by all the new people she has met, her new surroundings, the unclear job description given to her, and her new supervisor, Cathy Watch. However, her new coworker, Mary Mungy, provides her with a sense of comfort and Selma can tell they will be friends. After hearing of her complicated first week, Selma’s husband is worried that she might not be ready to go back to work yet or this might not be the right job for her. Selma assures him that she will get used to things. As the months progress, Selma’s problems with Cathy continually grow. Cathy has no communication skills, she uses intimidation with her subordinates, she does not believe in participative management, her moods constantly change, she treats all of her subordinates differently, she is controlling, and does not allow for a fun work environment. Despite these negatives, Selma and Mary have formed a close friendship. Cathy, sensing the women’s closeness and feeling uncomfortable with it, tries to separate them by making comments and even rearranging the front office. However, nothing seems to work. When it is time for Selma’s six-month probationary review, her meeting with Cathy goes surprisingly well, despite Selma’s earlier concerns. Yet, after the meeting is over, Cathy tells Mary that Selma disclosed to her information about Mary’s poor work habits. Mary is upset and confused. She distances herself from Selma initially, but when it is clear that Selma does not know what happened, Mary confesses about her meeting with Cathy. Both employees realize that Cathy has blatantly lied to Mary, in an attempt to pit the women against each other. Selma runs off to confront Cathy.

**Key Terms and Concepts:**
- Superior-subordinate relationship – Can also be known as the “managerial couple.” The professional work relationship between a manager and his or her employees. The subordinate is subject to the authority and control of the superior.

- Controlling superior-subordinate interaction pattern – The superior wants to “master and control everything and everyone around them. The people who flourish in controlling collusions tend to have a personality pattern characterized by rigidity, perfectionism, punctuality, orderliness, meticulousness, and frugality… Often such individuals can be stubborn, obstinate, inhibited, and unbelievably tense… As members of an organization, they may become preoccupied with factors such as hierarchy, conformity, status, and adherence to formal codes, elaborate information systems, and tightly prescribed procedures and rules” (Kets de Vries, 1999, p. 760).

- Participative management – A process of involving those who are influenced by decisions, in making decisions.
Superior-Subordinate

- Transformational leaders - Use self-reinforcement to motivate their subordinates and they work to align their subordinate’s goals with their own to create performance beyond expectation. They demonstrate charisma, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Madzar, 2001).

- Transactional leaders - Base their relationships on their own control of the situation and interactions. They often remain quiet as long as the subordinate is meeting his or her performance standards. Transactional leadership has its foundations in contingent rewards and management-by-exception, the attitude reflected by “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” (Madzar, 2001).

- Intimidation – To frighten into submission, compliance, or acquiescence by using threats.

- Manipulation – A management or treatment for purposes of deception or fraud.

- Maintenance communication – Communication used by superiors and subordinates to maintain their relationships in strategic situations (Lee & Jablin, 1995).

- Job satisfaction – Gratification afforded through one’s job, where nothing is left to be desired.

- Probationary period – Subjection to a period of evaluation and possible termination at the commencement of employment.

- Differential treatment – The perception of superior’s treating their subordinates differently.

- Coworker communication – Communication that occurs between employees of the same organization, usually at similar job levels.

- Fun work environment – An environment that “intentionally encourages, initiates, and supports a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities that positively impact the attitude and productivity of individuals and groups” (Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003, p. 25).

Key Players:
- Selma Collins
  - Recently hired Receptionist/Typist in Human Resources department of small, private college
  - 40 years old
- Mary Mungy
  - Worked in HR for past three years as HR Assistant for Recruitment
  - 40 years old
  - Befriends Selma
- Cathy Watch
  - Director of HR
Discussion Questions:
1. Would you define Cathy as an effective superior?

2. What does it take for a superior to be an effective communicator?

3. Can Cathy’s managerial style be seen as a collusive interaction pattern (e.g. the narcissistic, the controlling, the paranoid, or the sadomasochistic)?

4. Is Cathy a transformational or a transactional leader? Does this affect how her subordinates communicate with her?

5. How do Cathy’s past and her organizational values affect her management style?

6. If Cathy did not know how to handle the situation with Selma and Mary, was it acceptable to use manipulation like she did?

7. How could have Cathy handled the situation differently?

8. How does a superior’s use of differential treatment influence subordinates?

9. How does Selma’s communication with Cathy affect her job satisfaction?

10. How do Selma’s coworkers contribute to her perception of Cathy? Would she have felt differently about her superior if no one had shared their opinions?

11. What types of maintenance communication (e.g. routine, escalating, or deteriorating) does Selma use in her interactions with Cathy?

12. Does Selma’s unclear job description and organizational role have an effect on her job satisfaction?

13. Does Selma’s past experience have an effect on this job and her attitude toward it?

14. How does the fact that Selma is entering the workforce after having taken time off to have children affect the situation?

15. Is Selma and Mary’s friendship problematic?

16. What are the advantages/disadvantages associated with coworker communication?

17. What is the culture of this Human Resources department?

18. How does the use of language shape this organization?
19. What are the advantages/disadvantages of a fun work environment?

20. How can a work environment be fun while maintaining its professionalism?

21. What should Selma do in this situation?

*Teaching Activity:*
1. Break the class up into three groups.

2. The first group is given the task of deciding how Cathy could have handled the situation better from the outset of the problem.

3. The second group is given the task of deciding how Selma should confront Cathy after immediately finding out what had happened from Mary.

4. The third group is given the task of deciding how Mary could intervene and how the situation could be handled by all three organizational members.

5. Each group will be given 10 minutes to discuss their task and to come up with a solution.

6. Groups will then be asked to role play their situations for 2-3 minutes for the class.

7. After all groups have presented their solutions, the class, as a whole, will decide what the best course of action would be.

*Debriefing focus:*
Through the use of Selma’s case, the class discussion, and this brief teaching activity, the students should be more aware of the difficulties that are inherent in the superior-subordinate relationship. They should be able to apply this knowledge to the current situation and any similar situations they might encounter in their own experiences. An understanding of the problems caused by poor managerial communication skills should have been attained. The advantages and disadvantages of coworker communication should have been discussed and evaluated. Finally, students were to have found a balance between having a fun work environment and maintaining professionalism. All of these are important to the students’ understanding of organizational communication and should move them toward obtaining a more complete knowledge of organizations, in general.