Relations industrielles
Industrial Relations

Some Aspects of Power and Independence in Management

J. W. Howard

Volume 31, numéro 3, 1976

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/028728ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/028728ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)
1703-8138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Howard, J. W. (1976). Some Aspects of Power and Independence in Management. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, *31*(3), 466–475. https://doi.org/10.7202/028728ar

COMMENTAIRES

SOME ASPECTS OF POWER AND INDEPENDENCE IN MANAGEMENT

J. W. Howard*

People are inveterate categorizers and classifiers, but they are much more than that. They solve problems, well or badly, and so raise more questions than they answer. Even their poor solutions change things. Good ones produce some unintended results despite the keenest foresight. Desired changes are probably always followed by unanticapated results. To an extent classifying the noted changes and the men who effect them lend some stability for a time. Both people and the changes they produce are more complex than our usual labels depict.

Let us turn more specifically to classifying and categorizing as applied to our title's main terms — power and independence. We have been prone to associate power with groups and independence with individuals, although examples in reverse of these will readily occur to you. We make classifcations of black power, corporate power, union power, political power, woman power and what not. Some people may get a bit excited, or annoyed, about one or more of these depending upon their several interests and what others may seem to be up to at the moment. In the case of independence we take usually a more restricted view. We frequently categorize particular individuals as being either independent or dependent and speak as though that is the end of the matter. But these categorizations may not rest well as conclusions. Pigeon-holes maybe good places to hold things when they are not about to be reconsidered, but they are limiting.

Let us broaden the independence picture a bit and pull power more into the individual orbit. Meanwhile we will consider both as they impinge on, as well as being influenced by, some aspects of the society we have evolved and the kind of psychology generally believed in.

In action, power and independence seem related to each other. They both become of special importance to each of us at those times when we are faced with problems of difficult choice as well as when we have adopted positions we find hard to maintain. Moreover, they are never quite separated from our notions of the changing society in which we must function and the anticipated actions of people who operate close to us.

* Howard, J.W., Mahoney, Le Blanc & Howard, Montreal, PQ.

SOME CONCERN ABOUT CHANGES

At present there is some concern about changes, often happening at such a rate that we feel we can hardly cope with them. With notable exceptions, the bulk of these are easily attributable to the rapid proliferation of technology. Much academic and journalistic language is being expended to enlighten us regarding how we got into this kind of situation. Some such explanatory talk comes out in the form of three closely related mini-theories. These spring from particular emphases placed on differing aspects of economics and behavioural science teaching. Let's very briefly summarize these little theories.

The first is that we have a tiger by the tail. If we let go he will fix us. If we don't we will get dragged further away from our possible saviour, social progress. In fact, we may have just about had it. In less frightening terms; we now have more actual and potential material developments than the shaky foundations of our society can support.

The second mini-theory is to the effect that forces have been unleashed on a kind of man who does not have the psychological capacities either to understand or harness them. By this viewpoint people generally are seen as too primitive, too stupid or both to permit hope that they may ever be able to cope, let alone engage in successful evasive tactics.

The third little theory emphasized that people are doomed by an expanding technology foisted upon them by that small segment of the population who live the life of scientists and technicians and who are, ipso facto, non-humanitarian in both knowledge and outlook. (Patently a biased viewpoint) The theme leads to one of « how to stop them guiding us further down the path to destruction ».

If we buy any, or all, of these pessimistic ways of looking at our world there would not seem to be much that we can really do except bemoan the impasse we are headed for. Some people will insist that the old ways were best and that we should get back to them with all speed. They are among the unimaginative characters who claim that facts dictate conclusions. By following such unventuresome outlooks on our present state will not extend the horizon of our understanding very far. Moreover, it allows for a lot of evasion and shifting of personal responsibility.

But there is a feature which may be more difficult to guide and rectify than our relationships with some aspects of our social structure. That is our age-old, frequently re-emphasized, conviction that people are victims of their circumstances. Each of us, some more than others, are apt to exaggerate this outlook in moments of great difficulty when our situation appears confused or chaotic. But we have only to look about us to see that the achievements of men indicate that they have most of the time used their circumstances with imagination and were anything but the victims of them.

When we overlook this point, but have not quite given in to fate, we are prone to turn to the oracle who will tell us how to avoid predica-

ments and how to cope with those we have gotten ourselves into, but which we would like to attribute to the inexorableness of events in our surroundings. Oracles are in plentiful supply, each sitting on his own modern form of Mount Olympus. As in ancient Greece he will still tell your fortune provided you follow a certain course of action. We are told that the Greek oracles were patronized long after their lack of honesty had been well exposed, but there is no record of any of the great achievements of that age growing out of the advice of an oracle. The achievements resulted from hard and imaginative thinking, validated by venturesome and audacious behaviour. It would seem very unlikely that we will progress by any other means.

What is often over-looked about changes which we would rather have not seen happen is that they are off-shoots of unanticipated and unintended consequences of generally workable innovations. They were usually put into practice for good and sufficient reason. The great growth of technological matters are probably the most obvious examples, but any solution to a problem will carry unforseen consequences, including some possibly injurious ones. The purpose of solving a problem is to effect some wanted change. The more complex the problem the more likely the solution, when put into effect, will show some undesired results. Good critical discussion prior to final decision making will cut down on the ill effects, but it will never entirely eliminate them.

In the managerial world where policies are based on complex problem solving there is a strong tendency to test the efficacy of the policies by looking for the hoped for and desired effects which appear. That seems to be an expensive procedure as weel as ensuring that the unintended results only come to attention late in the day. Testing would be more effective when confined initially to looking for the evidence that undesired results are appearing. This would allow for quicker revision of policies which need it. Some powerful managers who have the responsibility of making the decisions in the first place may prefer the more costly testing because the good things appear more readily and support his self-esteem.

OUTLOOKS INFLUENCED BY MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

Probably nothing in Western civilization has had more influence than has behaviouristic or reactive psychology in holding our understanding of people at a limited and mechanistic level. Comparatively the natural sciences have extended our understanding and use of material things and processes to a very much greater degree. But psychology borrowed the theories found so useful in early physics and, for the most part, has persisted in clinging to them, despite their obvious limitations for the subject matter. We cannot have gone through our educational systems or read our newspapers and periodicals without getting an impression that men behave as they do because a combination of energies and forces move and direct them. What better way could have been devised to convince us that we act at the behest of things over which we have little or no control.

The majority of people have been sold on such items as stimuli, motivations, reinforcements, conditionings, drives, situational needs, rewards and punishments, etc., etc. One sometimes wonders how management could be talked about if there were no such terms to conjure with. However, it has occurred to some that this is a dead-end way of talking insofar as furthering their understanding of the persons around them is concerned.

The sad part about a general acceptance of this kind of psychology is not only that we can get nowhere in increased understanding of others, but that to manipulate people becomes the chief, but often unnamed, objective. It is granted that many people can be manipulated, but only for the period of time it takes them to think up evasive manoeuvres. A very large proportion of people are quite adept at doing just that.

ANOTHER VIEW OF PSYCHOLOGY — PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS

If stimulus-response psychology leads to such a dead-end in furthering our understanding of each other, what might we do about it? Well, it is more or less a free world so we may choose to make the effort to look at people in quite a different manner. We may choose to consider man as a lively, constantly learning and anticipating fellow whose behaviour is always of his own choosing and is his way of testing his predictions to find how they work or whether he can make them happen. If we choose this way of regarding people, we, of course, completely discard both mechanistic and animistic explanations for his behaviour. We need not waste time trying to prove the old explanations wrong. Just let them pass into history.

Of course you may ask, is this just a hopeful notion that is being put forward? Is there reasonable justification, in the form of an explicit and coherent theory, for chucking out the accumulation of research findings in University libraries and the extracts from them which management manipulators talk about with such ease and assurance?

There is such a coherent theory and enough accumulating evidence to indicate its value. It is nearly twenty years ago since the late Professor George A. Kelly of Brandeis University published it in « The psychology of Personal Constructs ». Space prevents going into detail about « Personal Construct Theory », but let us quote a brief summary of its fundamental stipulation: « A person lives his life by reaching out for what comes next and the only channels he has for reaching are the personal construction he is able to place upon what may actually be happening. » If we accept this way of looking at ourselves and our fellow men we must see behaviours as the forms of the questions men are asking rather than the answers to what stimuli acting on or in them are said to be giving.

A considerably different way of trying to understand people than that which all of us have been urged to accept.

POWER AS SEEN IN MANAGEMENT

So far we have been considering some aspects of the broader framework in which power and independence may be seen to function. Let us now look at them a little more from the inter-relationships angle with more emphasis on the personal aspects.

It is presumed that we can agree that a person exercises power through having at his command the use of one or more of a variety of instruments, e.g., access to financial resources, status in many forms, means of selective control of distribution of information, control of organizational arrangements through which pressures may be applied to vulnerable people, fluent and convincing arguing techniques, etc. If he has none of these he will make little impression on his managerial society no matter the possible value of his ideas, or how much he may wish to have his contributions recognized and accepted. If he has a hefty load of one or more of these controlling instruments he will certainly make an impression, anything from fostering tyranny to contributing in high measure to the progress and well-being of humanity.

Most of us have rather limited power and what we do have we use in varying ways to attain different objectives. Thus we come bang up against powers exercised by others, although we can often combine ours with those of others when the objectives are quite similar and our several ways of applying them are not too conflicting. Not much of this general picture seems likely to change in the forseeable future. Most often we exercise our power, individually or collectively, to further our projects, but we may exercise it in the static maintenance of a threatened position or value which we prize.

INDEPENDENCE AND POWER VS. FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

Questions arise. Can we exercise power without independence or is the power of a person proportional to his independence? We often speak as if they were almost identical and yet just as frequently we hear of men singled out on the basis of notable independence who quite obviously have very limited power to exercise. We often speak, probably incorrectly, of children being very dependant as contrasted with the much more independent adult. Maybe we are talking about something that is nearer to freedom and determinism. It all depends on what aspects we are stressing. Certainly the adult has more power and freedom than the child, normally speaking. That is, he has more freedom to determine more events. Anything that is determined must have been determined by the prior exercise of a freedom, or put the other way around, a freedom is not just for itself. It is a freedom only to determine something. Now it is not difficult to find many people who are free to determine a great many things, notably in both the structure and products of their own thinking, and whose power cannot be said to be more than minimal. So we will have to be careful about how we equate freedom and power.

We are hardly talking about the same things when we use these terms. Similarly, it will not do to equate freedom and independence. Most will agree that one might be free to determine many things and yet be personally highly dependent.

So we had better go back and look at independence from a different angle. Certainly most of us would like to feel that we could be broadly independent and often maintain that in many ways we are. A closer examination would let us see that we are dependent on a host of things which only others can provide. We may have some areas where we can rightfully claim bits of independence, even they keep changing. What gets us into trouble, or at least occasionally into a very unsatisfactory frame of mind, is when our dependencies are not sufficiently distributed among many sources. We want too much from too few people or possibly, from one organization. Nor can we reciprocate easily in kind. Our resources are too few and too fragmented. Many of our wants are vague, ill-defined yearnings which are not discriminated from and associated with others to a sufficiently precise degree to allow us to look around to where we might get them met through the attainment of specific objectives. This is an aspect of great dependency at its worst. Overlying all this is the universal tendency to want to extend and clarify our own understanding and in turn to be understood by others.

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Now what is it that most of us particularly want to have understood about ourselves?

We want others to understand the sense that we ourselves make of behaving as we do or as we did. And this is always reciprocated. In other words it is the reciprocal understanding of outlooks that is important. This does not mean mutual agreement or even any agreement at all. It simply means that *if* one sees the basis for the sense that another makes for thinking and behaving as he does one *could* see himself thinking and behaving similarly. This is rather more than the simple putting of oneself in the other man's shoes. Certainly it does not mean enveigling him into acquiescing in the interests of temporary peace. Neither, in any way, is it the applying of an assortment of motivations to him, whether openly or under our breath. Quite apart from such a superficial and arbitrary exercise of power, which is likely to end only in the application of manipulative tricks, it is irresponsible and insulting. We should have noted long ago this aspect of attributing behaviour to motivations and conditionings. We never apply these terms to ourselves, unless we are in a boot-licking mood or trying to be humorous. We apply them to those down the line and often behind their backs. We are usually careful about openly attributing them to people up the line who may have the power to strike back at us.

All of us, some more than others, have some facility in grasping and understanding other peoples' outlooks in the desirable sense

mentioned above. The less we employ it the more we are apt to exercise arbitrarily some of the powers we have and to trade off some small bits of independence for a wanted increase in that power, all the while getting more fixed on the importance of concrete facts and with less proneness to entertain new ideas. The problem then ought to be, how do we expand both our capacity to understand the thinking of others and our disposition to use that capacity more freely and widely? For here is the very crux of the solution of making our own and others' dependency loads bearable. Each man has to start with himself and be willing to do some work at the problem. There are techniques through which he can be helped, in a systematic way, to further the understanding of his own thinking and the strategies he usually employs. It is through these that the next steps in management development could be effectively undertaken, steps that would get managers off the merry-go-round of «how to do it» hobby horses. Instead of seeing management narrowly defined as «getting work done through others» it could be more appropriately viewed as «a variegated inter-weave of prediction, creation, assessment and control of *change*».

POWER VALUED BY WHAT IS ACCOMPLISHED

Some time back we mentioned that power is found being used all the way from fostering tyranny to contributing in high measure to the progress and well-being of humanity. Although power may be too often valued and sought for its own sake, the value we place on it should arise out of what is accomplished through its use. Between the extremes mentioned we can locate quite a variety. Since we are all in favour of the desirable uses and don't tend to get upset when we see them, let us leave those and take a look at a couple of uses which are found toward the undesirable end of the continuum.

INDEPENDENCE AND POWER OF THE BUREAUCRATIC MAN

There are some men of limited or lop-sided imagination, almost devoid of any genuine independence they can feel in their jobs, who use their power largely to maintain or enhance their positions. They reach out for the future, as all men do, but their personal constructions of what is going on, or what could be made to go on, are too constricted, rigid and impervious to new implications to let them entertain notions which might lead to lively, interesting and venturesome approaches to the selection and solution of new problems. They are often very bright at proving what cannot, or should not, be tried out. They are most at home in a bureaucratic organization and they are adept at fostering bureaucratic systems and procedures. In our more charitable moments we may label them stuffed shirts. What should be done about such managers? Well, we could remind ourselves of the remark of a farmer about Northern Spy apple trees who said, «if you want them to bear soon, you have to plant them a long time ago». If a company wants to reduce the number of these fellows it should start a better selection and development system a long time ago. In the meantime, on an individual

basis, those who have to deal with one of these men might go much further than they usually do in understanding him in the sense we mentioned a while ago. He will be quickly aware of this, as people always are, and will feel less lonely and isolated in his compacted dependencies. Maybe he will become just a little bit more receptive to venturesome ideas. Anyway everyone will feel better than they would be stopping at the point of applying uncomplementary labels.

THE HOSTILE MAN, POWER AND INDEPENDENCE

Another kind of manager who seeks undue power, also with severe loss of independence, is the strongly hostile man. One reason why he has not been adequately singled out is due to our popular notions about hostility. It is usually equated with undesirable actions of a rather drastic nature, with us or our neighbours on the receiving end. Since truly drastic actions are rather rare in management set-ups we most often do not apply the term where it might be quite appropriate. We tend to understand hostility only in terms of the insults or injuries expected or inflicted. This is applied behaviouristic psychology. We quickly learn to avoid doing or saying things, which in the past, have seemed to result in our becoming his target. We try placating him instead. It may appear to work temporarily. We do not try understanding what hostility is from the standpoint of the fellow who suffers from an overdose of it. This is fairly simple to do when we define hostility in Personal Construct Theory terms. It must be admitted, however, that the problem of dealing with it in a powerful boss is not such a simple matter.

In the first place we need to recognize that the hostile man is just as often a superficially over-loving fellow as he is a blatantly vindictive one, in the business world much more often so. Sometimes the same man will alternate between the two approaches. Occasionally one meets a very hostile man who so effectively manages a clever diplomatic approach that he isn't found out until it is much too late. By that time he may have made a fairly complete mess of things and be labelled nothing worse than stupid or unfortunate.

When a man has placed a bet he personally cannot afford to lose on predictions which evidence keeps showing were quite invalid and he keeps on extorting evidence or claiming the predictions occurred when it should be obvious that they did not, that man is *hostile*. So hostility is what a man suffers from when he has invested quite a chunk of his thought structure in predictions which can never pay off in the coin he wants. That coin he then proceeds to counterfeit.

Probably we should feel sorry for this powerful fellow. It is easier to do so when we recall that we all have had small bouts of hostility before paying off bets we lost on some of our own predictions. But that would not do him any good and neither will efforts to appease him. That is often what he is seeking as part of the confirmation that he was right all along.

We had better say more about the hostile man, because, when we find him in a position of considerable power in a firm, it is a serious matter both for him and the firm. His hostility broadens in its coverage and he becomes more and more incapable, despite frantic and clever efforts, of realistically validating some of his predictions. If he happens to be also aggressive he will tend to surround himself with « yes » men and push into operation a lot of things which turn out badly and for which others will have to take the blame. Here we mention an interesting point about aggression. Reactive psychology nearly always makes aggression and hostility synonymous, yet the business world does not always so equate them. The aggressive man may be highly regarded and very often rightly so. He is the fellow who expands the horizon of the things he wants to do and goes after them with initiative. Now in doing this he may annoy those who have other projects in mind. So he may get himself wrongly labelled hostile. It seems important that we should recognize the non-hostile aggressive man, give him much more scope and encourage others to develop similarly. In the better sense of the term, these are the enterpreneurs we never have enough of. I suspect that Canadian managers suffer less from lack of potential in this respect than from organizational structures, systems and conventions set up for them which only the most ingeniously, convincingly aggressive fellow can circumvent to exercise his initiative.

Many impatient and short-tempered people get erroniously labelled hostile. These may be difficult men to understand and deal with, but we should not complicate the picture by categorizing them wrongly as hostile.

To be certain whether a man is strongly and persistently hostile takes the time and effort necessary to find out whether he is wangling against odds for the rightness of viewpoints which are not going to be so validated, and this often in a rather frantic fashion. His wangling is associated with the bringing into the picture certain categories of people about whom he has exaggerated, ill-based convictions. In all he is a difficult fellow to cope with and rarely uses any of his power in a desirable fashion. He adds to the irrationality of authoritarian structures, as does the bureaucratic man.

CONCLUSION

By dwelling so long on a couple of varieties of sometimes very powerful and strongly, but very narrowly, dependent men, it is not the intention to give the impression that Canadian managers frequently fall into these classes. The great majority of them seem to handle whatever power they possess in a useful and responsible fashion. However, it is likely that they could often make their worlds much more interesting and come to feel considerably more independent, hence more efficient managers. To do this they need to become much more prone to seek out and evaluate the outlooks of their associates and subordinates rather than so often succumbing to the temptation to leave them categorized at an inferior level of understanding.

To conclude, let us go back to where we began by saying that men are inveterate categorizers and classifiers. However, they are even more inveterate experimentalists and problem-solvers. They devise meanings or constructions to place on the events around them. The organizing of these constructions lets them reach out to imagine things which have not yet occured. They experiment further by trying out what they imagined, each in his own fashion. This is the way men keep out of trouble, get into trouble, get themselves out of it again and occasionally come up with some highly workable and creative solutions to complex problems. But what about our categories? At their best they are handy things to sit on while we think up some new ways of using them for different purposes in the next while. They are at their worst when they are held as unchanging bits of revealed truth which we defend with all the power we have. And when that happens it doesn't make us feel any more independent either. Much less so.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BANNISTER, D. And FRANSELLA, F. (1971) *Inquiring Man.* The Penguin Press, London

BANNISTER, D. (Ed. 1970) *Perspectives in Personal Construct Theory.* Academic Press, London & New York

HOWARD, J. W., "Management-Innovations, Objectives and Bits of Psychology." *Canadian Personnel & Industrial Relations Journal.* Sept. 1973.

HOWARD, J. W., Management Science — How goes its Philosophy," *Relations Industrielles,* Vol. 30, No. 2, 1975 University Laval.

KELLY, George A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs,* Vols. I & II. W. W. Norton & Co. New York.

MAHER, Brendan (1969) *Clinical Psychology and Personality.* (The Selected Papers of George Kelly) John Wiley & Sons, Inc. New York.

POPPER, Karl R. The *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (revised 3rd edition 1972) Hutchisson, London.

POPPER, Karl R. *The Open Society and its Enemies* (fifth edition 1966) Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.