

Task Uncertainty on the Relationship Between Social Hierarchy and Leadership Emergence

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Abstract: Self-managing teams have gained popularity, yet those teams in practice often have limited formal hierarchical differentiation, formal order, or imposed coordination. Social hierarchy has functions of establishing order and facilitating coordination, and it plays important roles in teams where team members autonomously interact and manage tasks. Two important forms of social hierarchy, status and power, critically affect how individuals on a team emerge as leaders, and thus help self-managing teams' coordination. In the current study, two questions are explored: 1) How do informal status and power affect leadership emergence in project teams? 2) How do team task types affect the relationship between informal status/power and leadership emergence in project teams? A field study was conducted in a consulting firm in South Korea. The results show that the high-status individuals are most likely to emerge as leaders of project teams, and that the relationship between status and leadership emergence is stronger in teams dealing with highly uncertain tasks.

Keywords: task uncertainty, social hierarchy, status, power, social networks, leadership emergence

1. Introduction

Social hierarchy is a fundamental feature of social relations (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and it has two functions in organizations: (1) to establish order and coordination, and (2) to motivate employees to strive for promotion (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Hierarchy provides clear social governance in groups by allowing leaders to assign tasks or allocate resources (Hogg, 2001), and it provides incentives for individuals to climb the organizational ladder to obtain greater compensation and comfort (Tannenbaum, Kavic, Rosner, Vianello, & Wieser, 1974).

The two functions of social hierarchy, coordination and motivation, are important in groups where roles or formal positions are ambiguous, where group tasks are confusing, or where work is poorly coordinated (Greer & Caruso, 2007; Overbeck, Correll, & Park, 2005). Successful teams should have clear hierarchical roles, while those lacking structure perform more poorly (Hackman, 1987). Well-designed team structure has a positive influence on a team's engagement in learning and continuous improvement (Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2020). Contemporary organizations are increasingly adopting self-managing teams as working units (Gerard, 1995). Yet, self-managing teams often have limited formal hierarchical differentiation, formal order, or imposed coordination. Consequently, status and power - two important forms of social hierarchy - may critically affect how team members interact, manage tasks, and experience conflict.

Two forms of social hierarchy have been frequently studied. Social status is defined as the extent to which an individual is respected or admired by others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). People tend to gather information about a target individual's ability and expertise from direct interactions or interpersonal observations, and they tend to respect and admire those perceived to be highly competent (Ridgeway, Boyle, Kuipers, & Robinson, 1998). Social power is defined as control over valued resources in social relations (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Individuals depend on more powerful individuals to obtain resources. Power and status are related but distinct constructs (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Both social power and social status significantly affect employee behaviors, but empirical evidence has indicated that status and power levels have unique qualities and effects on employee behaviors (e.g., Blader & Chen, 2012; Hays & Bendersky, 2015). For example, high status individuals may show more helping and cooperative behaviors (Cheng, Tracy, Henrich, 2010; Willer, 2009) and willingness to take the perspective of others (Blader & Chen, 2012). In contrast, holders of power tend to act according to their own goals and interests (Hirsh, Galinski, & Zhong, 2011). These respective influence of status and power may play different roles in establishing order and facilitating coordination in self-managing teams.

Establishing order and facilitating coordination - functions of social hierarchy - may play important roles in teams where individuals on a team emerge as leaders. In competitive environments, individuals claim a leadership role (e.g., individuals decide to initiate projects or to perform leadership behaviors) and others consent to that individual's identity as a leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In self-managing teams, members may assume leadership by taking advantage of social hierarchies that will grant the member the power to coordinate work and assign tasks.

Leadership emergence is an important research topic because of its critical influence on team processes and performance.

Research regarding approaches to leadership emergence have predominantly focused on individual levels and have vastly explored facets such as personality, values, knowledge, and skills (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). However, this approach focuses only on individuals' innate characteristics and fails to consider individuals' potential interactions with team and organization members. Consequently, I provide insights beyond the individual approach. For example, teams must continually check their direction and progress to confirm they are parallel with organizational directions. We cannot understand how self-managing teams form and function without considering individual positions in organizations. As a result, approaches that consider social interactions among team and organizational members can help scholars better understand leadership emergence in teams (Azumi & Hage, 1972).

Thus, a structural approach based on social interactions among organizational members can be especially useful in explaining leadership emergence in teams (Bryson & Kelly, 1978) because it can answer questions that an individual approach has not been able to answer. That is, studying social hierarchy, social networks, and interactions within and outside teams may reveal how leaders emerge in teams and how team members work together. Scholars have called for using a structural perspective for studying leadership in teams (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Grant & Parker, 2008).

2. Hypotheses

2.1 Status and Leadership Emergence in Project Teams

Social status is defined as the extent to which an individual is respected or admired by others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). People tend to gather information about a target individual's ability and expertise from direct or observed interpersonal interactions (Ridgeway, Boyle, Kuipers, & Robinson, 1998). They tend to respect and admire those who exhibit high competence. High social status tends to be self-reinforcing by generating (1) opportunities for advancement, and (2) expectations for behaviors that fit with status advantage (Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

First, respected individuals are likely to have better opportunities (Merton, 1968; Ospina, 1996) to choose the best jobs or positions. For example, an opportunity to conduct high quality research is more likely to be given to a PhD student from a more prestigious undergraduate school than to a student from a lower status school. At the same time, high status individuals will be more likely to claim rather than grant leadership. Second, potential leaders are expected to behave in ways that are consistent with their status. Social interactions are most harmonious when individuals act consistently with their position in the social hierarchy (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). High-status individuals must behave in ways that are parallel with the social hierarchy to maintain admiration and status (Flynn et al., 2006). Respect is strongly based on perceptions that the admired individual is competent. In team activities, team members expect that high status individuals will support, encourage, and motivate the team—all competencies inherent in potential leaders. Individuals who behave inconsistently or inappropriately with expectations are often negatively evaluated and socially rejected (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and lose their status. The ultimate result of the opportunities for advancement and expectations for behavior is that high-status leads to the likelihood of claiming team leadership by initiating projects.

The leadership emergence process requires that aspirants claim leadership and that team members grant the claims. Followers tend to select leaders from members who (1) contribute in ways that satisfy members' needs, (2) fulfill roles necessary for successful team functioning, and (3) act in accordance with socially defined leadership expectations (Mann, 1959). The first and third qualities closely fit the relationship between status and leadership emergence. First, high status individuals tend to act competently, as team members would expect leaders to do. Because high status individuals have more advancement opportunities, they are more likely than low status individuals to actively initiate discussions or team projects. More important, they are better able to satisfy team members' needs. They tend to focus on their interpersonal relationships (Blader & Chen, 2012; Galinsky et al., 2008), to consider others' needs (Blader et al., 2013; Galinsky et al., 2006), and thus engage in helping and cooperation behaviors (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010; Willer, 2009). As team members observe those behaviors, they are more likely to grant leadership to high status individuals. Although most team members would like to acquire the benefits that come with leadership, high status individuals would be more motivated to claim the role. Simultaneously, team members would be more likely to grant their leadership claims. Therefore, I hypothesize:

H1. Individuals with high informal status are more likely to be leaders of project teams than individuals with low informal status.

2.2 Power and Leadership Emergence in Project Teams

Power is also an important predictor of leadership emergence. Social power is defined as control over valued resources in social relations (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Individuals who lack power depend on those in power to obtain more information or larger budgets. Power is similar to status in being self-reinforcing through (1) participation/influence and (2) confidence. First, powerful people are more likely than those who lack power to voice concerns in group activities (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and to openly express their opinions (Anderson & Berdahi, 2002; Berdahl & Martorana, 2006). When leadership positions are open, they are more likely to claim leadership without hesitation. Second, they are more likely to make choices confidently and to be more action-oriented (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). They also tend to make the first offers in bargaining contexts (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007). In the leadership claiming process, they may find it easier to talk with potential followers, to be first to confidently claim the leadership position through goal-directed action (Galinsky et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). They will have better access to resources and will be more likely to recognize issues, devise solutions, and provide opportunities for group improvement (Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997). That is, they are more likely to claim leadership by initiating projects.

Mann's (1959) arguments can be applied to explain how team members grant leadership status to high power individuals. Mann's second observation—that leaders are chosen from those who can fulfill roles necessary for successful team functioning—fits closely with the logic. When team members select their leaders, they consider whether the leader can successfully lead the team toward achieving its goals. They evaluate whether the potential leader takes initiative, connects ideas to action plans, and can provide resources needed for team activities. High powered individuals are action-oriented, especially regarding goal-directed actions (Galinsky et al., 2003). They participate actively and lead team discussions confidently. Consequently, team members are more likely to grant high powered aspirants the leadership role. In sum, while most team members want to be team leaders, high powered individuals are more motivated to claim leadership, and team members are more likely to grant their claims. Therefore, I predict:

H2. Individuals with high informal power are more likely to be leaders of project teams than individuals with low informal power.

2.3 Status and Leadership Emergence under High Task Uncertainty

Teams tackling highly uncertain tasks have a range of appropriate responses and need a wide range of knowledge, skills, ideas, opinions, and perspectives from all team members. Because of their tendency to focus on interpersonal relationships, to consider the needs of others, to engage in helping and cooperation, and to consider others' perspectives and opinions, high status members are the ones most likely to give team members the development and mentoring they desire (Blader et al., 2013; Galinsky et al., 2008). Teams confronting high task uncertainty face greater risks of task failure. When difficulties rise, warm, involved, and considerate high status individuals are more likely to help. Therefore, high status individuals would choose to lead project teams facing high uncertainty, while team members would consent to their leadership.

Powerful individuals might seem to be ideal for teams facing high uncertainty because powerful leaders can use their vast resources to find appropriate solutions. However, power is more useful for teams facing highly complex rather than uncertain tasks. If leaders lack clear direction and attempt to utilize resources alone, they will be a burden, not a help, because using resources without clear direction can be waste and make it more difficult to change direction in case a leader makes a mistake. Moreover, when difficulties rise, powerful leaders may blame rather than support other team members because powerful leaders tend to express attitudes and emotions straightforwardly (Brinol et al., 2007). In other words, powerful leaders may fail to provide consideration or patience, and will instead focus on the task. Even more detrimental case is that those high-power leaders derogate (Overbeck & Park, 2001) or threaten subordinates (Mead & Maner, 2012) when they actually need more ideas and suggestions to perform high uncertainty tasks. Therefore, individuals with high power may be less suitable for teams dealing with high uncertainty.

H3: Individuals with informal status are more likely to be leaders of project teams performing tasks of high uncertainty than individuals with informal power.

2.4 Power and Leadership Emergence under Low Task Uncertainty

Team tasks of low uncertainty can be solved in a few desirable ways, and thus require that leaders have specific knowledge or skills. In teams performing tasks of low uncertainty, or clear tasks, team members expect leadership that provides compelling solutions and action plans. What is required in these teams is a leader with initiative and drive. High power individuals can meet those expectations because they are able to set agendas, norms for discussion, rules for behaviors, and opinion standards (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). They also address team tasks and goals more directly (Galinsky et al., 2003), and thus ensure that members work efficiently. Therefore, high power individuals would choose to lead project teams dealing with tasks of low uncertainty, while team members would consent to their leadership.

In contrast, high status individuals may be unsuitable for leading teams handling tasks of low uncertainty. When clear solutions, action plans, and limited timelines are required, they may fail to contribute to team success or members' development. For example, a leader who cares too much about everyone's ideas and opinions (Blader & Chen, 2012) or personal development, and spends time helping (Cheng, Tracy, Henrich, 2010; Willer, 2009) may prevent the team from progressing toward its ultimate goals. Therefore, high status individuals may be less suitable for teams dealing with low uncertainty.

H4: Individuals with informal power are more likely to be leaders of project teams performing tasks of low uncertainty than individuals with informal status.

3. Field Study

3.1 Sample and Study Design

To examine the effects of status and power on leadership emergence in project teams and the effect of team task types on status/power-leadership emergence relationships, I collected data from a company that uses self-managing teams as its primary working unit. The organization employed 101 consultants and 20 administrative support staff.

The company has an unconventional procedure for forming project teams. Employees are allowed to freely and voluntarily initiate and join teams, so that project teams are formed naturally. Any employee can initiate a project and become a project team leader. Consultants typically communicate with key people in the client companies to discuss goals for the consulting projects. The initiator then announces the project through the company intranet six weeks before the project team is launched, so team members are recruited via web-board, online messenger, phone, or in-person meetings. All consultants can apply to any team openings. If they are offered the job, they can choose whether to join the team. Initiators can also accept or reject candidates. Once the team is assembled, the initiator officially registers the project in the administrative office and receives financial and other resources for the project. Each employee works for one project team at a time; participating in multiple projects simultaneously is not allowed.

I first obtained HR archival data to gather employees' demographic information. Then I conducted an online survey with questions asking about their individual dispositions and ties with other consultants in three types of social networks: communication, respect, and advice. Two years after the online survey, I collected data about project team history to get a sufficient sample size before too many formal hierarchical changes had occurred, for example, by promotion. During the 2-year window, 319 consulting project teams were formed, and each employee participated in an average of 9.21 projects. The average team size was 3.5 members, and the average project took 9 weeks. After I obtained data about the projects, I asked two senior managers to rate task uncertainty for each of the 319 projects.

3.2 Measures

Informal power. Informal power was measured with betweenness centrality in communication network by asking employees to identify their communication relationships with their colleagues. I provided an alphabetized list of all employees and asked: "Please check the names of people in this organization with whom you communicate for job-related or firm-related information."

Informal status. Informal status was measured with in-degree centrality in respect network by asking "Please check the names of people in this organization whom you respect, admire or look up to." Respect network measures sentiment relations (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Calculating individual prestige in respect networks requires directional relation assumptions. Using data with directional relations, researchers can distinguish

between choices made “out-degree” and choices received “in-degree.” The simplest individual-level measure of prestige is the in-degree of each individual. The idea is that prestigious individuals tend to receive many nominations or choices.

Task uncertainty. Two senior managers at the research site rated the task uncertainty of 319 projects following my instructions: “Task uncertainty is defined as a lack of predictability associated with inputs, processes, and outputs of the broader technical system within which the work is performed. Please rate task uncertainty of each project from 1 = Very low to 5 = Very high.” I calculated Cohen's kappa to check for agreement regarding uncertainty inherent in each consulting project. Agreement was $\kappa = .91$, $p < .001$.

Leadership emergence. I operationalized leadership emergence as “likelihood of becoming a project team leader” because the research site used self-organizing as a method for forming consulting project teams and selecting leaders. Each employee must work in project teams, as leaders or as members. I counted how many projects each employee had worked on and how many leadership positions they had taken.

(The likelihood of) leadership emergence = the number of leadership positions taken / the total number of projects.

I controlled for age, gender, big 5 personality traits, organizational tenure, working experience, and organizational rank in the model.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations. Table 2 shows the results of regression analysis for the effects of power and status on leadership emergence. Informal status was positively related to leadership emergence ($\beta = 2.02$, $p < .01$). The positive effect of status on leadership emergence was consistent in all models when demographic information, personality traits, formal social hierarchy, and project-related control variables were added. Power had a positive and significant effect on leadership emergence in Models 2, 3, and 4 ($\beta = 5.61$, $p < .01$; $\beta = 5.68$, $p < .01$; $\beta = 5.56$, $p < .01$, respectively), but the effect disappeared when big 5 personality traits were included in the models ($\beta = 3.90$, $p > .05$; $\beta = 3.89$, $p > .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported but not Hypothesis 2. Table 3 shows the results of regression analysis for the effects of power and status on leadership emergence by project uncertainty score. In Model 6, informal status was positively related to leadership emergence ($\beta = 5.66$, $p < .05$). Power had no significant effect on leadership emergence in any models. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported but not Hypothesis 4. The results support my prediction that the individuals most likely to emerge as leaders of project teams during team formation stages are those who have informal status in the social hierarchy of organizations. Furthermore, the type of team tasks may determine the impacts of status and power on leadership emergence. That is, status affects leadership emergence in teams dealing with highly uncertain tasks, but power doesn't have such effect in teams with low task uncertainty.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Coefficients, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Leadership emergence	0.33	0.37	<i>n.a.</i>							
Average uncertainty of projects involved	2.11	0.82	0.22*	<i>n.a.</i>						
Power	0.005	0.008	0.30*	0.19	<i>n.a.</i>					
Status	0.035	0.056	0.61*	0.33*	0.40*	<i>n.a.</i>				
Gender	0.31	0.46	-0.19*	-0.11	-0.09	-0.21*	<i>n.a.</i>			
Age	37.93	6.92	0.56*	0.00	0.04	0.60*	-0.39*	<i>n.a.</i>		
Organizational rank	3.31	0.98	0.61*	0.02	0.02	0.58*	-0.23*	0.84*	<i>n.a.</i>	
Organizational tenure	8.72	6.62	0.67*	0.05	0.07*	0.55*	-0.36*	0.85*	0.80*	<i>n.a.</i>
Education	2.12	0.41	0.26*	-0.18	0.19*	0.33*	-0.09	0.42*	0.39*	0.38*
On leave	0.05	0.22	0.10	0.23	-0.09	-0.05	-0.08	0.00	-0.12	0.03
Openness to experience	3.48	0.73	0.15	0.11	0.06	-0.12	0.01	-0.11	-0.05	-0.05
Conscientiousness	3.41	0.79	0.00	0.03	0.01	-0.10	0.24	-0.11	0.00	-0.09
Extraversion	2.75	0.90	0.06	0.02	0.12	-0.09	0.26	-0.22	0.03	-0.16
Agreeableness	3.41	0.77	0.00	0.01	-0.12	-0.18	0.15	-0.07	-0.03	-0.03
Neuroticism	2.72	0.67	-0.04	-0.04	-0.01	0.17	0.12	0.20	0.16	-0.01
Number of project involved	9.21	4.24	-0.11	0.06	0.15	0.35*	-0.15	0.13	0.06	-0.04
Average number of available projects	20.42	1.85	-0.05	0.05	0.08	0.08	0.17	-0.15	0.00	-0.15
	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
Education	<i>n.a.</i>									

On leave	-0.06	<i>n.a.</i>						
Openness to experience	-0.25	-0.04	1.00					
Conscientiousness	0.11	-0.05	-0.22	1.00				
Extraversion	-0.03	-0.11	0.41*	-0.06	1.00			
Agreeableness	0.01	0.11	0.41*	0.19*	0.24*	1.00		
Neuroticism	0.09	0.01	-0.05	-0.32*	-0.08	-0.39*	1.00	
Number of project involved	0.00	-0.21*	-0.05	-0.29	-0.16	-0.19	0.32	<i>n.a.</i>
Average number of available projects	-0.08	-0.27	-0.17	0.07	0.24	-0.25	-0.10	-0.13

Note. N = 101; * p<0.05; coefficient alpha reliabilities are reported on the diagonal

Table 2: Results of Regression Analysis for the Effects of Power and Status on Leadership Emergence

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	0.16**	-0.54**	-0.54**	-0.43**	-0.35	0.24
Power	4.20	5.61**	5.68**	5.56**	3.90	3.89
Status	4.08**	1.70**	1.70**	1.96**	1.98**	2.02**
Gender		0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.05	0.06
Org rank		0.20**	0.20**	0.19**	0.19**	0.20**
Education		0.06	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.04
On leave			0.03	-0.02	-0.07	-0.10
Openness to experience					0.06	0.06
Conscientiousness					0.01	0.02
Extraversion					0.00	0.01
Agreeableness					-0.04	-0.06
Neuroticism					-0.07	-0.08
Number of project involved				-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Average number of available project						-0.03
Observations	101	101	101	101	72	72
R-squared	0.46	0.66	0.66	0.66	0.66	0.67

Note. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01; values are unstandardized regression coefficients

Table 3: Results of Regression Analysis for the Effects of Power and Status on Task Uncertainty

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	1.86**	3.23**	3.21**	3.16**	2.73*	0.88
Power	10.25	9.87	10.49	10.57	7.61	7.30
Status	3.07	4.66*	4.60*	4.49*	5.94*	5.66*
Gender		-0.11	-0.09	-0.09	-0.25	-0.26
Org rank		-0.05	-0.04	-0.03	-0.18	-0.18
Education		-0.55*	-0.58*	-0.57*	-0.74*	-0.70*
On leave			0.38	0.40	0.32	0.56
Openness to experience					0.03	0.07
Conscientiousness					0.16	0.15
Extraversion					-0.01	-0.05
Agreeableness					0.14	0.18
Neuroticism					0.07	0.09
Number of project involved				0.00	0.01	0.01
Average number of available project						0.08
Observations	64	64	64	64	50	50
R-squared	0.12	0.21	0.22	0.22	0.34	0.35

Note. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01; values are unstandardized regression coefficients

5. Conclusion

From the study, status and power are shown to be two forms of informal social hierarchy, apart from formal hierarchical organizational rankings. The findings suggest that social hierarchy, especially informal status, plays a critical role in leadership emergence. This relationship is more prominent when teams' task uncertainty is high. My investigation extends previous research and contributes to the literature in several ways. First, going beyond an individual approach, I adopt a structural approach to investigate the effect of social hierarchy on leadership emergence and conflict in teams. Second, this study expands the structural boundaries affecting the emergence of power and status. Third, I identify the mechanism by which social networks affect leadership emergence. Fourth, status is added to the social network discussion, which has generally focused on power and gave less attention to status.

Managers are advised to carefully consider individuals' structural characteristics such as informal status and informal power in addition to innate characteristics when forming teams and assigning leaders. Further, the

moderating effect of task uncertainty on the relationship between social hierarchy and leadership emergence seems significant. Teams should be careful about choosing, electing, or designating team leaders according to the types of team tasks.

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