

## Chapter 8

# Exploring Superior– Subordinate Communication From the Perspectives of African American and Latino American Subordinates

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### ABSTRACT

*Utilizing phenomenology, this research presented the salient themes which emerged from interviews with 37 professionals who were African American and Latino American men and women from various organizations. Several themes surfaced from the interviews, but the most notable was that employees regarded supervisors as friends or non-friends/professionals. Employees who reported being friends with their bosses seemed to also report having more rewarding superior-subordinate interactions. These relationships with bosses sometimes created other opportunities for employees in their respective organizations, opening doors employees may not, otherwise, have been able to open. This study explored some of the advantages and disadvantages of reporting to various bosses, and it detailed a plethora of experiences along the way as they related to race and gender.*

### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most meaningful relationship employees have within organizations is their respective relationships with their direct supervisors. Bosses have significant influence on subordinates' experiences in organizations as well as their commitment to organizations (Bakar & Mustaffa, 2008; Lee, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001; Schlueter, Barge, & Blankenship, 1990; Tata, 1996; Turner & Henzl, 1987; Valikangas & Okumura, 1997; Wayne & Ferris, 1990) as these supervisors can shape raises, promotions, and other organizational advancements and experiences (Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, & Real, 1995). If employees have

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effective, positive or at least satisfactory relationships with their bosses, their supervisors may be more prone to supporting subordinates in efforts to advance within organizations (Kim, & Yukl, 1995; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Waldron, 1991). Extant research suggests that positive superior-subordinate communication leads to job satisfaction in employees (Winska, 2010; Page & Wiseman, 1993). However, when bosses despise their subordinates, these employees may have difficulty attaining organizational goals. Similarly, bosses who are verbally aggressive with subordinates and who fail to use verbal and/or nonverbal cues (immediacy) that convey positive regard for subordinates are regarded by subordinates as less credible and less competent (Duncan, 2002; Lybarger, Rancer, & Lin, 2017; Mehrabian, 1966). In other words, when bosses dislike or fail to understand their subordinates, these employees may find themselves exerting an exorbitant amount of energy achieving personal and professional goals that other subordinates take for granted.

Research offering insight into superior-subordinate communication can be beneficial for a plethora of reasons (Jablin, 1979, 1980, 1981; Infante & Gorden, 1979; Krantz, 1989; Lybarger, Rancer, & Lin, 2017; McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014; Sias & Jablin, 1995). A few of them, however, are as follows. First, because most organizational members are not self-employed, superior-subordinate relationships are prevalent enough to warrant in-depth analysis, and interpretive research offers that option. Second, as organizations continue to become more diverse, both scholars and practitioners may want to enhance their comprehension of superior subordinate relationships, particularly as race may influence them (Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker, & Tucker, 1980; Allen, 1995, 1996, 2000; Cox, 1990, 1993, 1994; Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Fernandez, 1982; Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk, Zhou, & Gilmore, 1996; Fine, Johnson, & Ryan, 1990; Fine, 1991; Foeman & Pressley, 1987; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Greer-Williams, 2000; Henderson, 1994; Houston, 1994; Houston & Kramarae, 1991; Ibarra, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Lorde, 2001; Morrison & Glinow, 1990; Newman, 1997; Powell & Butterfield, 1997; White, 1990). Third, evaluating superior-subordinate relationships from the perspectives of subordinates may yield meaningful results because subordinates may see aspects of leadership styles that bosses don't perceive or don't want to acknowledge, which is consistent with the outsider within status (Collins, 1986). Furthermore, subordinates may reveal crucial aspects of their relationships with their bosses that need further exploration such as why they tend to modify their communication with bosses based on the following: 1) how powerful they perceive their bosses to be, 2) the political climate in their respective organizations, and 3) their own skills and abilities to manipulate the political arena at work (Kumar & Mishra, 2016; Richmond, Davis, Saylor, & McCroskey, 1984; Schlueter, Barge, & Blankenship, 1990). Ultimately, research scrutinizing superior-subordinate relationships from the perspectives of subordinates may lend knowledge to current understandings of organizational communication.

The intersection of race and gender in organizations may create interesting workplace dynamics for organizational members. "At any moment, race, class, or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person's life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people's experience" (Collins & Andersen, 2001, p. 3). While people's organizational experiences may be shaped significantly by their race and/or gender (Mumby, 1996, 1998; Moore, 1999; Monroe, DiSalvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1990; Newman, 1997; Ostrander, 1999; Parker, 2001; Parker & ogilvie, 1996; Parnell, 1998; Pierce, 1995; Reskin, 1993; Smith, 1987; Yammarino, Dubinsky, Comer, & Jolson, 1997; Daley & Naff, 1998; Ely, 1994, 1995; Gardner, Peluchette, & Clinebell, 1994; Gayle, 1991; Hegde, 1996; Hollway, 1996; Ibarra, 1992, 1993; Javidan, Bemmels, Devine, Dastmalchian, 1995; Konrad & Cannings, 1997; Kremer, Hallmark, Cleland, Ross, Duncan, Lindsay, Berwick, 1996; Lamude, Daniels, & Graham, 1988), many women, non-dominant racial groups (people of color), as well as other non-dominant groups seem to encounter

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