Friday, 11/10/23
10:35 AM-11:50 AM

CLE 205: Leading from the Middle: Navigating Middle Management Successfully as an AAPI Manager

DESCRIPTION: Middle management—no matter how one defines it—is like being caught between a rock and hard place. Managers face pressures from above and below, and often bridge the gap between their teams and upper management. And this level of management often does not get much attention and is underappreciated. That’s why middle management roles are sometimes the toughest to navigate, succeed in, and strike the right balance and perspective for your, your team’s, and your organization’s success. All of this is, of course, further complicated by the internal and external pressure to advance or lead your office’s DEI work while also dealing with the stereotypes people hold about AAPI managers, especially when real or perceived intersecting identities exist (such as gender, sexual orientation or identity, disability, etc.). This program will offer practical guidance and tips for middle managers (or those striving for that role) so that they can best support their teams but also develop and grow themselves, both personally and professionally. You will hear from attorneys based on their experiences in middle management in a variety of settings, who have navigated their roles successfully. Key competencies will also be discussed.

Moderator:
• Jenny Ma, Senior Advisor, Office of Civil Rights, HHS

Speakers:
• H. Ashley Chi, Senior Partner, Korn Ferry
• Jonathan Cruz, Deputy Attorney General, California Department of Justice
• Erica Lai, Senior Litigation Corporate Counsel, Northrop Grumman
• Peggy Li, Senior Director of Chapters, American Constitution Society
Leading from the Middle: Navigating Middle Management Successfully as an AAPI Manager
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#NAPABA23
What is Middle Management?

• No matter how one defines it—is like being caught between a rock and hard place.
• Look up and down—pressures from above and below.
• The engine that chugs, the cogs that make things work, the glue that keeps companies together.
• Big tent definition (in the legal field and beyond)!
Why is Middle Managing So Difficult?

- Often bridges the gap between their teams and upper management.
- Does not get much attention and underappreciated.
- Lack of actual, meaningful, intentional training.
- Toughest to navigate, succeed in, and strike the right balance and perspective for your, your team’s, and your organization’s success.
And if you are AAPI....

- Stereotypes about AAPI managers.
- Traits you may or may not hold.
- Real or perceived intersecting identities exist (such as gender, sexual orientation or identity, disability, etc.).
- Unconscious biases (good workers, not leaders)
- Advance or lead your office’s DEI work or affinity group.
- Often trailblazing and “first”
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6 SKILLS FOR LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE

1. THINKING & ACTING SYSTEMATICALLY
2. RESILIENCY
3. COMMUNICATION
4. INFLUENCE
5. LEARNING AGILITY
6. SELF-AWARENESS
Summary. Middle managers have long had reputations as ineffective or weak supervisors. But research shows that, in fact, they’re often the people that make an organization run smoothly between hierarchies. Especially today, as companies become more reliant on virtual... more

The idea of middle managers as unexceptional, mediocre supervisors has been around for decades — at least since a seminal 1977 HBR article by Abraham Zaleznik that made a clear, explicit distinction between being a leader (an inspirational...
visionary) and a manager (a strategic administrator). These ideas are still central to what’s taught in many MBA and executive development programs, where there’s a tendency to educate managers on how to “upgrade” and become leaders.

In my 20 years of being one and then researching them, however, I have developed great respect for middle managers. They are the engine of the business, the cogs that make things work, the glue that keeps companies together. Especially as remote and hybrid work takes over — and the distance between employees increases — middle managers are more important than ever. The most effective ones are in possession of humane, sophisticated communications skills and the knack to mediate and find common grounds between actors at different levels in the organization.

In fact, I believe that the division between leadership and management increasingly sounds anachronistic, even obsolete. It is time to reunite leadership and management in one concept, and recognize middle managers as connecting leaders. This concept recognizes that every leader is also a follower, and every follower is also a leader. Thus, a manager in the middle of hierarchical layers builds relationships with those at the top (from a position of followership and lower power) and with the people at the bottom (from a position of leadership and higher power).

This type of role is challenging, however, because it requires being both a proactive leader to direct reports and an engaged follower to the top management, all at the same time. Current ideas of leadership and training fail to capture this complex double act. For example, executive development programs focus on teaching leadership skills so managers can influence direct reports, largely ignoring the development of their upward influence skills. But it is directly through these double upward and downward influence activities that connecting leaders can shrink hierarchical distance and bring multiple levels of an organization together.
4 Types of Connecting Leaders and Practices

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Based on years of research on this topic, I have identified four sets of practices that are key to creating successful connecting leaders. They are illustrated by four mini case studies below, which outline both important practices and also potential risks companies and connecting leaders should be aware of as they’re trained in these roles. The case studies represent real managers I interviewed, although their names have changed for confidentiality reasons.

**The Connecting Leader as Janus**

Essentially, this means engaging with the concerns of both upward and downward partners in an organization. This ability to look simultaneously up and down the hierarchy, in two directions, allows connecting leaders to empathize with the burden of both sides and spread the weight of shared issues.
Chris is a seasoned middle manager in a large bank headquartered in London. He does not exude the charisma of a “heroic” leader: he is quietly self-confident, soft spoken, and very approachable. At the start of the pandemic, when emergency lockdown measures kicked in, he succeeded by keeping this active double gaze, first on his employees:

Now more than ever I need to make sure that everyone’s voice is heard; the remoteness makes it easy for people to hide, and shy away. But then again, anyone has got different circumstances, so you have to be more flexible around this. ... You need to check in more regularly, and to reassure them.

And keep a gaze towards his boss, by ensuring she was in the loop. By increasing the sharing of information, he flattened the hierarchical distance between himself, his boss, and his team:

I have increased the frequency with which I hold regular catch ups with the top. I have asked my boss to join calls with my direct reports sometimes, so she can answer questions from them. We can both be on the same page, have the same temperature check, get the raw message. This helps us respond quickly to concerns from the bottom.

Through his double gaze, Chris showed that key to be a successful manager is not enough to be just an effective leader — cherishing relationships with one own’s reports from a position of higher authority — but also that it is essential to be an engaged follower by involving and influencing his own’s boss from a position of lower authority.
The greatest risk for Chris and other Janus leaders is burnout and emotional labor. Because Chris is consistently empathizing with many different people at different levels of the organization, it is important he guards his energy and shares the burdens with both sides. Organizations can mitigate this risk by offering coaching and psychological support for managers to discuss, become aware, and overcome this cognitive and emotional burden.

**The Connecting Leader as a Broker**

A broker creates a dialogue between people who have conflicting agendas. Because hierarchical levels have often different goals and needs, connecting leaders can serve as interpreters and translators of these needs, brokering inter-level dialogue between the people above and below them.

Sumiya, a middle manager in a private bank, couldn’t give Mark, her star employee, the top ratings she thought he deserved in his latest performance review. Mark had been promoted the previous year and Sumiya’s boss, Paul, had indicated that top rankings were only for those destined for that year promotion pool. She empathized with Mark’s disappointment, realizing the negative impact this could have on his motivation; she communicated this with a lack of defensiveness when he brought it up to her. She admitted that she did not have full control in the decision process, but recognized that her ability to broker a meeting with a top executive (Paul) created an opportunity.

To address the issue, she set up a quick meeting between Mark and Paul. Mark had the opportunity to be heard in his disappointment and to hear Paul’s rational. The quick meeting with Paul propelled Mark’s motivation. As Mark told me:
I went to speak to Paul about my disappointment, and he was like: “I completely agree with why you’re dissatisfied. You should deserve a four but I had to give you a three.” He was really open and honest about it and then also he was just like: “...We value you, this is companywide decision, and, you know, don’t be hard done by about that.”

Sumiya’s ability to broker the meeting, which cost Paul only 10 minutes of his time, turned what could have been a negative event into more of a unifying one. Furthermore, Mark was given the opportunity by Sumiya to start building a fruitful relationship with Paul, increasing his motivation and loyalty to the company.

The greatest risk for Sumiya or any leader-as-broker is an uncooperative or unavailable executive, or one who is challenging to win over. It’s also possible that, in attempting to bridge different parts of the organizational hierarchy, misunderstandings can occur. To address this, an organization and top leadership can foster a culture of transparency and humility, where top leadership accepts an open-door engagement with lower parts of the organization and embraces problems with a sense of understanding.

**The Connecting Leader as a Conduit**

Conduits courageously amplify the voices of their direct reports upwards. In many cases, these are constructive challenges to those in positions of power that can both trickle up in a mediated way or also be directly communicated from the bottom to the top.

To understand how this might play out, consider Simon, a Risk Management Office in a large financial firm who reports to Mike, the Head of Risk at group level. Mike is the sponsor of a revolutionary change program aimed at streamlining risk reporting across divisions. Simon uses his own voice to improve the implementation:
I just have to remind Mike what it’s like it on the ground. Because him and his team on the 47th floor, they don’t always have the opportunity to engage with people on the trading desks. Part of my team sits on the trading floor and they see the people, the business managers, and discuss things.

Furthermore, Simon sponsors his own direct reports’ upward voice flow by allowing them to bring their input directly to Mike and his team:

I get them directly involved in contributing their views because, at the end of the day, they will be buying into the change. Yesterday I went upstairs with two of them and they explained (to Mike) why they were not happy, particularly on two things.

This all took courage for Simon in two ways. First, he had to admit he was not always “the smartest guy in the room,” as he needed to forefront his reportees’ voices to persuade his boss. Second, he amplified challenging points, which might be at odds with his boss’ agenda. In other words, he exposed himself personally for others to be heard. We know from previous research that in order to speak up, organizations need to foster a culture of psychological safety. This type of culture is vital for connecting leaders, who often have to speak up on behalf of others or encourage their employees to speak up themselves.

**The Connecting Leader as a Tightrope Walker**

Finally, this last practice requires critically appraising and balancing dilemmas. The different, even opposite, needs and demand from upper and lower levels place the connecting leader in front of a myriad of predicaments each day.
For example, think about designing redundancy schemes while simultaneously keeping the people on a team motivated, or applying mechanisms of performance control while ensuring that people have enough autonomy and drive in their position. In these situations, connecting leaders run the risk to be cognitively overwhelmed and paralyzed. They can overcome this by critically thinking through the different sides of impasses strategically and balancing them carefully.

The example of Andrea, the head of a client-facing team in the sales division of a digital marketing startup. As the startup was scaling up and preparing to be sold by the founders, the company introduced a digital app for salespeople to log every single client conversation. A rebellion ensued, with salespeople feeling micromanaged from the top. Andrea found herself in a dilemma: On one hand, she thought the new system was counterproductive and limited the autonomy her people needed to achieve high performance:

*I don’t want my people logging every conversation record on a computer. It serves no purpose, other than telling the founders that we’ve spoken to the client. My people are professionals, they know what they are doing.*

On the other, she understood the need to push hard, as the company’s valuation was directly tied to deals in the pipeline.

Andrea was extremely clear in presenting the dilemma and balancing the actions she decided to put in place on her team:

*The trade-off is: okay, let’s do it. It’s a useful record: but minimize what you write! Let’s be strategic about this.*
This thought process illustrates the skills needed in the constant balancing act by connecting leaders, walking along a rope between hierarchical layers. There are risks to this, though, including cognitive overload, confusion, and slow action. It is important these risks are mitigated by offering safe critically thinking spaces for debate amongst middle managers, where pushbacks to top policies can be discussed with peers. This is especially important at times in which the company asks the most of them, like larger scale strategic changes that require redundancies or restructuring.

**How Companies Can Cultivate Connecting Leaders**

In addition to the mitigators discussed above, there are three other measures organizations and executives need to take to cultivate connecting leaders. Without them, these leaders may feel like doing and saying what’s necessary is just too perilous.

**Get company buy-in to support risk-taking.** In order to recognize the sophisticated efforts of middle managers, you have to start highlighting the above four behaviors as key performance indicators. This can be achieved through both executive buy-in and a common understanding of these practices company-wide.

Executives buy-in is important because much of what connecting leaders do is risky. It would be naïve and idealistic to expect people to ramp up their performance in these areas without providing support. Remember: some of these behaviors are riskier than others. For example, speaking up for others requires exposing yourself to the top of the organization, as well as possibly disappointing the bottom. So, executives need to be prepared to aid connecting leaders by fostering and environment of psychological safety.

Once there is buy in from the top, both the communications and human resources departments need to work together to update company-wide language — for example, on balanced scorecards, hiring competencies lists, and contracts to reflect the importance
of connecting behaviors. The balanced scorecards for executive performance should also be tweaked to accommodate the importance of psychological safety and their co-responsibility to ensure connections are truly enabled.

**Create development programs centered on both leadership and followership.** First, development programs should be dedicated to unpacking, explaining, and training the abilities associated to each of the four practices. These should teach not just leadership skills (i.e. how to influence those lower in the hierarchy) but also on followership skills (i.e. how to influence those higher in the hierarchy).

In particular, the word “followship” is associated with images of passivity. Development programs can aim squarely at making followership an active action. To do this, you might design workshops that include managers from different levels reimagining and defining what it means to be active followers, sharing and reflecting on the difficulties of speaking up, influencing from below, and linking hierarchical levels. When I have run these types of sessions in organization, I have seen transformation in the room and a sense of pride in being skilled at upward influencing. For connecting leaders, learning about and normalizing active, thoughtful followership is as important as learning about leadership.

**Invest in better emotional support.** Connecting leaders, given their strategic position, are often pulled in two directions, with emotional and cognitive costs. So especially during times of change, it is important to offer this population extra support, like coaching and spaces for safe conversations and sharing. This is crucial for their success, but is often undervalued by companies who put a greater share of their coaching budget to top executives rather than to middle managers.
As hierarchies within companies become more fluid and virtual, middle managers will increasingly become channels for relationships, influence, and connection. For companies to be successful coming out of the pandemic, they need to recognize the complex and multifaceted roles of middle managers, who are not just visionary, inspirational leaders but also courageous, engaged followers. Their ability to perform both upward and downward roles effectively requires them to develop very sophisticated, humane skills to bring together the layers of your organization.

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Middle management can feel like navigating shark-infested waters. GETTY

Leadership has gotten a lot harder over the past couple years—and middle managers may have it worst. They face increased pressure for results and the escalating requirements to support employees
who are struggling with wellbeing. Middle managers experience unique tensions between groups, demands and expectations.

Middle management is arguably tougher than senior leadership roles or individual contributor roles—and evidence tends to prove the point. It’s a special person who can navigate the maze of demands, find balance among all the pressures and meet the needs of diverse groups of stakeholders. Middle managers require attention because they have such an important influence and impact on the business.

But organizations can support middle managers so they don’t become stressed out, burned out or ineffective—and research points to what works best.

**It’s Really Hard**

The demands on leaders have shifted and now leaders must not only tolerate ambiguity, but embrace it. They must go beyond developing networks and nurture relationships. They must communicate with clarity rather than certainty, and they must not only engage, but go beyond—and inspire people.

In addition, managers have a significant effect on the mental health of their people—as much as a partner and more than a doctor or therapist according to some studies. Leaders have always cared about people’s wellbeing, but the stakes appear to be even higher today.
Middle managers especially feel the pressure and they are experiencing high levels of depression and anxiety compared with other roles in organizations, according to a study by Columbia University.

**Why It’s Tough**

The problem with middle management is demonstrated in its nature. Middle managers are caught between. The study by Columbia University found they suffer from being in contradictory roles—as owners of a problem, but also those who must solve the problem. They are directing work and they are performing work—and the dual nature of these roles can be challenging.

In addition, middle managers can find themselves caught up in the conflicts of those who are above them in the hierarchy as well as those who are below them, and this can be a source of stress, based on a surprising study by Manchester University.

Middle managers are also under pressure for all kinds of results. They must hit the numbers, stay on schedule and meet customer demands—but they must also ensure people are retained and that wellbeing is supported.
Middle managers also have to find the right mix of being authentic about their own perspectives, but also aligned with organizational messaging. They must develop rapport with their teams at the same time they maintain appropriate distance and professionalism.

Middle managers are often faced with the challenge of implementing something they haven’t influenced and which they may or may not agree with. And they must manage themselves at the same time they are managing others.

Any of these tensions would be challenging to a leader, but middle managers tend to face the accumulation of these tensions—leaving them caught between and caught up in significant stress.

What They Need

In order to be their best, middle managers need plenty of support and empowerment, and research points to a few ways to accomplish this most effectively.

#1 – Value and Empowerment
One of the first things organizations and leaders can do is to be clear about how they value middle managers. Often, ideas from middle managers aren’t shared across the organization and this can cause middle managers to feel disempowered and disengaged, according to a study by the University of California.

In addition, a study by the University of Kansas found middle managers felt like go-betweens without enough influence—and they sought to control even the smallest of details to win back some sense of empowerment. Middle managers can feel like they are in the shadows—asked simply to execute, rather than to provide expertise.

Ask middle managers for their input. Share their ideas. Give middle managers the spotlight and recognize their contributions. Be sure middle managers know their points of view are heard, amplified and taken into consideration.

Move decision making to the lowest possible point in the hierarchy and ensure you’re incorporating middle manager input and perspectives—based on their experience of how the work is really occurring.

#2 – Context

Like all employees, middle managers are a product of the culture they’re part of—but they also amplify culture because they affect many people’s experiences of work and quality of work-life. A study by Vanderbilt University found when middle managers were ineffective, it was typically because they reported to next-level leaders who were similarly ineffective, and middle managers’ satisfaction was based on the trickle-down of leadership styles.

Be sure to nurture a culture of respect and empowerment. Provide plenty of direction and a clear sense of vision and mission at the
same time you’re empowering involvement and participation from individuals and groups. Ensure clear practices, limits and boundaries balanced by approaches which allow for adaptability and responsiveness to markets, competitors and customer demands.

Also ensure there are clear principles and policies for middle managers to follow. Too often, managers are left to decide on how the work gets done with too few guidelines—leaving them without support or the backstop of policies.

**#3 - Expectations**

Middle managers also need realistic expectations. Too many managers report they are up against unrealistic demands for results with too few resources—or requirements for a higher level of performance than they are skilled to meet. A study by Penn State found that unrealistic expectations could be the origin of bad behaviors in which middle managers were under so much pressure to perform they fudged numbers or took destructive shortcuts.

Be sure to set goals which are challenging, but achievable. And ensure managers have the resources they need to meet them. Be open to managers who push back and listen when they talk about what they need to be successful. Empower creative solutions when managers face problems and back up managers when they have to make tough decisions.
Middle management can be a lonely place. GETTY

#4 - Support

Middle managers also need support. With their unique challenges, they especially need mentors—preferably from other departments so they can benefit from advice which is more distant and therefore more objective, and which can be a safe space for them to vent, voice uncertainty or seek guidance.

Middle managers also need avenues to build their networks with other middle managers with whom they can share their challenges, let down their hair and have confidential conversations away from their teams.

#5 - Resources

As they face greater demands, middle managers also need resources. They access to information so they know the business deeply—and can make good decisions. They need outstanding communication skills as people increasingly turn to them for perspective, point of view and clarity.

Managers also need an understanding of how to ask questions, listen and express empathy. Often these capabilities are innate, but they can also benefit from coaching and development. Leaders need to know about the resources they can tap into for their own
wellbeing, and the resources they can offer to employees who may need support as well.

And leaders need time to do their jobs. Too often, companies add so much training to managers’ plates that it exacerbates pressure and demands, rather than reliving or empowering the managers.

**Working Through It**

A big part of supporting middle managers is realizing their unique tensions—and their special value. Investment in middle management skills is critical, but so is investment in middle managers as unique contributors—who make a huge impact on results, on the work experience and on people.

*Follow me on Twitter or LinkedIn. Check out my website or some of my other work here.*

Tracy Brower, PhD

I am a Ph.D. sociologist and the author of *The Secrets to Happiness at Work* exploring happiness, fulfillment and work-life. I am also the author of *Bring Work to...* Read More
Managing from the Middle: Frontline Supervisors and Perceptions of Their Organizational Power

KIMBERLY R. KRAS, SHANNON PORTILLO, and FAYE S. TAXMAN

Frontline supervisors serve in a critical role, maintaining relationships between upper management and frontline workers; however, we still know relatively little about how subordinates view their power in relation to their supervisors and how frontline supervisors understand and exercise their own power. Focusing on street-level workers and frontline supervisors across a statewide community corrections agency, we explore perceptions, experiences, and assertions of power in the workplace. Using focus groups with thirty-two street-level probation and parole officers and focus groups and field observations of seventy-five frontline supervisors, we find that officers and frontline supervisors have widely differing views on the power of the frontline supervisory position, some of which are influenced by gender. While street-level workers align frontline supervisors with policy creators, frontline supervisors view themselves as disempowered go-betweens. Frontline supervisors compensate for their perceived lack of power in policymaking and implementation by using micropower strategies to assert their power. This study extends street-level bureaucrat theory to the role of frontline supervisors, who in practice are distant from the upper management roles with which they are typically categorized.

INTRODUCTION

Employee roles in organizations are most often divided into two classes—management and street-level work—without considering that most organizations have multiple layers of management and supervision that sit between. Most literature focuses on top executives as managers and on managers as a holistic group (Morrill 1995; Grimm and Smith 1991; Burawoy 1979). Managers are policy makers, while street-level workers are policy implementers. Scholars have thoroughly discussed the discretionary nature of both managers and street-level workers, in particular the inherent autonomy and discretion of those on the front line (Lipsky 1980; for review, see Portillo and Rudes 2014; Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010). In his classic work on the topic, Lipsky (1980) argued that street-level police officers have significant power because they decide when and how to enforce laws. Although police officers cannot engage with every person they encounter breaking a law, they do decide with whom to engage, fundamentally shifting how we understand power in organizations. Policy is not only the written word on the page that is decided by elected
officials and top managers but also the decisions made at the frontline regarding how to enact the policy in practice. The street-level worker wields significant power as the “ultimate” policy maker when implementing policy in practice.

Recently, scholars have started to recognize that frontline supervisors and middle managers play important yet distinct roles in organizations, together operating as a “critical nexus” between policy making and policy implementation (Vickovic and Griffin 2014; Reeves et al. 2012; Rudes 2012; Steiner et al. 2012; Edelman 2008; Balogun 2003; Huy 2002). Scholarship traditionally views supervisors as “company men” who primarily focus on connecting written policy to organizational action at the street level (Whyte 1956). Under this traditional view, frontline supervisors are responsible for translating policy into practice, but this view does little to elaborate on how they use their discretion when interacting with subordinates and superiors day to day. Due to their location near the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, but with the authority associated with the management team, frontline supervisors operate in a unique space connecting policy formation to on-the-ground action but are often excluded from the experience of the street-level bureaucrat. As Rudes (2012, 4) notes, “mid-level actors maintain a level of autonomous interpretive power dissimilar to that experienced by other organizational actors in higher and lower workplace positions.” Frontline supervisors are charged not only with ensuring compliance from the workers they supervise but also, importantly, with interpreting and framing organizational policies and plans for the workers who must implement them with the citizens they serve.

The role of power within correctional organizations often focuses on the power of street-level workers to gain compliance from prisoners, parolees, or probationers (Steiner et al. 2012; Hepburn 1985). Power dynamics, however, are also at work within the organization and have the potential to shape the ways in which policies are ultimately enacted by staff. Here, we explore how frontline supervisors experience and mobilize their power and how their subordinates—street-level community corrections officers—view and experience the power and authority of their immediate supervisors. Because they are charged with enforcing mandates of the state and organization via their frontline staff while also negotiating the constraints of their position as dictated by local-level power struggles, frontline supervisors in community corrections provide an ideal opportunity to explore the role, authority, and power of the lower-level manager. After discussing the literature on the role and power of frontline supervisors and on traditional street-level views of middle managers, we provide information on the context of community supervision generally and of this study in particular. We go on to discuss data from our study and our findings regarding how frontline supervisors are seen by street-level workers and by the frontline supervisors themselves. Finally, the conclusion assesses how this influences the organization and the potential effects of frontline supervisors on policy interpretation and street-level implementation.

FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS, STREET-LEVEL WORKERS, AND POWER WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION

Lipsky’s (1980) conceptualization of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) as powerful figures in hierarchical organizations due to their ultimate discretion and influence on policy making has substantively shaped the scholarly study of staff in public service agencies. SLBs’ power results from their role as intermediaries between the organization and the people it serves. SLBs determine which rules to enforce and which strategies to practice, thereby exhibiting an inherent autonomy while working, often unobserved by supervisors, on the
frontlines. In this way, SLBs also “construct justice (or injustice) for the citizens they interact with” and wield significant power over how citizens experience the state through discretionary decision making (Portillo and Rudes 2014; Musheno 1986). This is especially important in organizations such as community corrections agencies, which have important oversight of socially vulnerable populations and objectives such as public safety. Importantly, SLB theory provides a framework for understanding the influences of frontline discretion and autonomy not only over citizens but also on the structure of the organization and, ultimately, on the dissemination and implementation of top-down policy.

Within hierarchical organizations, frontline supervisors have power over the street-level staff they supervise. Traditionally, scholars position frontline supervisors as middle management and focus on their power to interpret and frame policy for their street-level staff (Rudes 2012; Czarniawska and Jeorges 1996; Hodson 1991; Smith 1990). As Hodson (1991, 492) points out, middle managers are powerful because they are in a position to “not only feather their own nest (as historically they have been accused of doing) but also to interpret, resist, and reformulate organizational plans.” While it is their power to interpret and translate policy from higher in the organization that makes frontline supervisors’ position vis-à-vis policy makers important (Czarniawska and Jeorges 1996), they also have the power to directly influence the staff that they supervise. In her empirical study, Smith (1990) focuses on middle managers in the midst of restructuring in a private banking environment, arguing that middle managers show versatility and have significant influence over their staffs. Her research is also a call for a more refined, data-driven focus on the middle manager. Frontline supervisors play a dual role, responsible both for the political demands of administration and for day-to-day interactions with frontline staff (Wells et al. 2009). These frontline supervisors are critical to the process of informal socialization and mentoring for street-level staff (Hogan et al. 2006; Lambert et al. 2005). Frontline supervisors are able to use their judgment when it comes to how best to manage, focusing their staffs on organizational goals, providing support, and enforcing outcome expectations. The power of frontline supervisors lies in their ability to interpret policy, guide socialization, and enforce policies, rules, and norms in their offices. The frontline supervisor, then, can either encourage or hinder the practices and outcomes of street-level staff while simultaneously framing and transmitting the policies and goals of the organization.

In organizational studies of both institutional and community corrections, discussions of power in organizations often focus on the power street-level staff have when interacting with inmates, probationers, or parolees (Steiner et al. 2012; Hepburn 1985). The power of frontline workers lies in their inherent discretion and autonomy while working with citizens (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010; Lipsky 1980), yet scholars rarely focus on correctional staff with supervisory roles and power within the organization (Reeves et al. 2012), even though the management and relationship between supervisor and street-level worker is often highlighted as an important organizational element (Garland, McCarty, and Zhao 2009; Lambert 2004; Van Voorhis et al. 1991; Jurik and Winn 1987). Prior research implies that the use of power in the correctional setting may have both direct and indirect impacts on the implementation of policy and on the goals of the organization. One decades-old study examined the power relationships between correctional staff members as a source of conflict depending on the types of institutions in which they worked. Zald (1962) found that officers in custody-focused institutions (as compared to rehabilitative-focused or blended institutions) experienced less conflict among staff. Zald asserts that this relative lack of tension is due to greater clarity in roles and alignment with institutional goals. That is, everyone is on the same page when the goals and

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processes of the organization are clear. Aside from this study, there remains a dearth of literature on power relationships amongst staff, especially between staff and supervisors, in corrections settings. In order to examine potential impacts on the implementation of correctional policy, we focus on frontline supervisor staff to explore the power and authority of their position and how their street-level employees view that power and authority.

The study of power has a long and complicated intellectual history across a variety of disciplines. One of the traditional (and most common) definitions focuses on the ability of one person to influence the actions of another (Dahl 1957). Power is both macro and micro, with macro power referring to the overarching authority served by the organization and micro power manifesting in the behaviors of the organizational actors (Brass and Burkhardt 1993; Krackhardt and Porter 1985). Within organizations generally, there are multiple sources of power and authority on which individuals may rely (Portillo 2010). These sources of power may be either formal—such as rules, hierarchy, organizational policy, and law—or informal—such as social status, personal relationships, and influence. Portillo (2010) argues that workers rely on different sources of power based on what they have access to given their social and official positioning within the organization. Turning to criminal justice organizations, Hepburn (1985) laid out five bases of power that correctional officers may use to gain compliance from inmates: legitimate, coercive, reward, expert, and referent. He found that prison guards discussed their legitimate and expert power as the most important bases of their power when interacting with prisoners. According to Hepburn, legitimate power constitutes authority “by virtue of the structural relationship between the position of the guard and the position of the prisoner,” while expert power is defined as “power based upon technical competence and judgment” (1985, 146, 148). Steiner et al. (2012) extended this early work by Hepburn with parole officers, finding that parole officers view legitimate power as an important basis of their power with parolees. Because they are able to provide sanctions and incentives to parolees, parole officers, in contrast to correctional officers, also identified reward power as highly salient to their work. Reward power is derived from giving or withholding incentives (Steiner et al. 2012; Hepburn 1985). Steiner et al. attribute this difference in bases of power to the different populations studied. While Hepburn’s studied focused on incarcerated individuals, Steiner et al. focused on parolees being supervised within the community. Like Hepburn before them, Steiner et al. focus on authority as formal and deriving from the state via official positions and regulations within the organization. While this authority is seen as legitimate power, there are other bases of power that have less to do with the formal authority of the state, such as knowledge and experience that grows into expertise or the discretionary ability to offer or withhold specific incentives.

In this study we aim to extend this initial research on power and correctional settings, looking not to professionals interacting with clients but instead to professionals interacting across hierarchical levels within an organization. While scholars have explored the relationship between criminal justice actors and how they assert power and authority over the individuals formally controlled by the criminal justice system, there is relatively little scholarship exploring how power works within criminal justice agencies. Specifically, we extend to the frontline supervisor the theoretical frameworks proposed by Lipsky and others concerning the influence of street-level workers on policy implementation by considering how power and authority operate between these two layers of frontline staff. As policy makers increasingly look to reform the criminal justice system, it is important to understand how the power dynamics of these organizational actors operate as key mechanisms for implementing organizational policies and practices.
SETTING

The organization under study is a midsized mid-Atlantic community corrections department responsible for supervising parolees, probationers, and those on mandatory release from prison. Staff supervise approximately 62,000 offenders in the community. Street-level workers, referred to here as officers, are the direct supervisors of probationers and parolees in the community and are responsible for day-to-day operations such as in-office and in-community meetings with offenders, communication with the court via status reports, and ensuring compliance with court directives. Their immediate manager in the office, the frontline supervisor, is positioned second from the street-level worker, with no less than four layers of management between them and the agency director. The frontline supervisor is responsible for supervising officers, and their duties include reviewing cases, approving court actions, and following up with officers on problematic or complicated cases. One additional responsibility of frontline supervisors is the collection and reporting of data on various policies and procedures to upper management, increasing the visibility of performance (or underperformance) in their offices. For example, frontline supervisors are responsible for monitoring and reporting back on the status of restitution paid to victims.

Frontline supervisors are also responsible for the interpretation and dissemination of top-down correctional policies in their offices. These policies are delivered from the state and regional administration, and frontline supervisors are tasked with presenting the information to staff, devising a plan for implementation within their offices, and ensuring that it is successfully applied. For example, when contact requirements (how often and where officers see clients) change, frontline supervisors must communicate these changes to all of the officers under their supervision and hold their officers accountable to them. In this capacity, frontline supervisors are also responsible for providing evaluations of employees and, if performance is deemed poor, for pursuing corrective or disciplinary actions.

The organization under study was a model of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in the early 2000s, emphasizing supervision based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity model and other grounded practices such as motivational interviewing (Andrews and Bonta 2010; Taxman 2008). Staff were trained in these practices and given relative autonomy to establish reporting protocols and interventions for their caseloads. Frontline supervisors guided and mentored officers to ensure that supervision was based on the implemented EBPs. However, political changes near the end of the decade resulted in sweeping changes away from the EBP model of supervision, reverting toward a model of surveillance and containment. This shift was largely in response to increased crime and violence in the region’s urban areas and attributed to the community supervision population. Simultaneously, the organization experienced several high-profile incidents of employee misconduct, which administrators concluded was the result of too much frontline discretion. Administrators designed initiatives to increase oversight of employee activities, especially in accordance with new policies around quantifying supervision, such as using counts of how many office visits were conducted or how many urinalyses were collected as metrics of performance. As such, the innovations that distinguished the organization from others and encouraged staff autonomy were diminished, and staff members were scrutinized for probationer and parolee failure on supervision. For instance, in response to a high-profile incident of recidivism (e.g., a probationer commits murder), supervising officers and their frontline supervisors would be called to testify in front of a state board to determine whether all supervision protocols had been followed (in-office visits, community contacts, arrest checks, etc.). While an audit in this case is customary in most agencies, the cultural...
shifts in the study organization reflected a sense of mistrust of employees by administrators and vice versa.

DATA AND SAMPLE

Data for the current study come from a larger project exploring organizational change through specialized management training. For this article, we rely on ethnographic observations of training sessions and focus groups with seventy-five frontline supervisors as well as focus groups with thirty-two street-level officers. The majority of frontline supervisors are female (65 percent) and black (68 percent). The majority of street-level officers are female (71 percent), but information on race is not presented due to incomplete data. The trainings were developed by external community corrections training consultants to deliver specialized training addressing a myriad of issues related to performing the frontline supervisor role, including professionalism, multitasking, and becoming leaders in the agency. Overall, the trainings sought to enhance the leadership and managerial skills of frontline supervisors. Researchers did not participate in the design or delivery of the training but did observe the process and provide feedback to the consulting trainers as well as to the agency. Our data collection for the larger project focused broadly on organizational change and the effectiveness of training. Our focus group questions and observations centered on the day-to-day processes of frontline supervisors, how their subordinates saw them, and how training contributed to changes in day-to-day supervisory behavior over the course of our research. The discussion of the power of frontline supervisors emerged inductively from our data over the course of the study as officers and frontline supervisors discussed power in their day-to-day interactions.

Training consisted of six daylong sessions spread out over five months. Trainings and focus groups occurred between January 2014 and May 2014. Four researchers simultaneously conducted a total of 120 hours of observation of trainings and focus groups. During each training day, researchers dispersed throughout the room to observe and capture a range of interactions among frontline supervisors and trainers. Researchers took detailed notes and compiled these notes for each day to generate a single description of the day’s experiences.

Focus groups were conducted in between training sessions to supplement our understanding of frontline supervisors’ experiences in training and of officers’ perceptions of the effects of training. There were between seven and ten participants at each focus group, with each focus group lasting approximately two hours. Focus groups with frontline supervisors centered on obtaining a sense of how participants received the training as well as their verbal evaluation of the training materials and ideas. Additional topics included information about their roles and job responsibilities within their offices and within the organization. Focus groups with officers explored their opinions and perceptions of the organization and of their relationship with their supervisor.

DATA include detailed field notes taken during and after observations of all training sessions and focus groups, participants’ responses in discussion and activities, and informal conversations with researchers. Over time, participants came to trust the researchers and disclosed personal information or opinions outside of training sessions, such as during bathroom breaks, during lunch, or in the parking lot. Researchers did not record these instances at the time but later incorporated them into the typed field notes.

ANALYSIS

For analysis, researchers linked field notes to the qualitative software program Atlas.ti. Analysis began with an open coding strategy following an inductive analytic approach,
allowing researchers to identify themes within the data as they emerged (Charmaz 2006). Open coding included a line-by-line technique in which each sentence of text is read to produce a set of broad themes (Charmaz 2006). Following open coding, researchers recoded the data for emergent codes, revealing discussions of ideals, realities, and coping mechanisms related to the supervisor role and the organizational context. After establishing primary themes, researchers reanalyzed each theme using a focused coding technique to further refine and develop them. Here, themes surrounding the day-to-day work experiences and participant opinions of the frontline supervisor role emphasized underlying processes, mechanisms, and uses of power. These themes were further analyzed to uncover and compare the perceptions and experiences of both street-level officers and frontline supervisors. The excerpts presented in the findings section are representative and typical of field notes taken during trainings and focus groups.

**FINDINGS**

Despite traditional assumptions about their role and power, we find a disconnect in the perceived authority of frontline supervisors. Street-level workers view frontline supervisors as empowered policy makers, while frontline supervisors view themselves as disempowered go-betweens. As such, frontline supervisors exert power through micro strategies (Rouleau 2005). Following the definitions of Brass and Burkhardt (1993), macro power refers to the authority bestowed by the organization, and micro power is defined as the behaviors exhibited by frontline supervisors to assert power in day-to-day interactions. As Lipsky (1980) describes, street-level workers fail to see themselves as the policy implementers and experience the authority of the organization from their frontline supervisors, imbuing their supervisors with the macro power that comes with this state-sanctioned official authority. In contrast, frontline supervisors see themselves as deprived of the authority of the organization and the state and so instead rely on individualized power tactics to assert authority over their subordinates. While street-level officers discuss frontline supervisors as agents of the organization who are “towing the company line,” frontline supervisors are using micro power strategies to stake their claims as managers. Both street-level officers and frontline supervisors fail to recognize the impact of the hybrid street-level/managerial role of the frontline supervisor to influence the delivery of correctional services and the ways in which policies and procedures are implemented. For example, frontline supervisors dictate when street-level officers must be in the office and when they can be in the field for contact visits with offenders. In these assertions of micro power strategies, frontline supervisors actually wield significant power within the organization, influencing the flow and framing of contact policies from the upper echelons of the organization down to the street-level implementers. It is in this way that the role of the frontline supervisor, typically viewed as fully aligned with management, blends into the role of the street-level worker: the frontline supervisor acts as a conduit for policy but also immensely impacts the way policy is practiced.

While frontline supervisors discuss micro power strategies as ways to assert their authority, these strategies often result in significant differences in how agency-wide policies are carried out, potentially influencing the outcomes of policies for the probationers the agency supervises. Over time these day-to-day uses of micro power add up to meaningful changes in the policies of the organization. For example, when frontline supervisors insist that their officers make contact in the office rather than the field so that they can oversee the interactions, they also add an additional hurdle for probationers. Instead of the officers going to the probationers, probationers must come to offices, which may be
difficult due to work schedules, family obligations, and transportation options. An individual micro power assertion that is intended to impact the supervisor-employee relationship and limit the discretion of the street-level worker has unintended consequences for probationers and fundamentally changes how a policy is carried out.

Table 1 provides a typology of micro and macro levels of power that inductively emerged from these data. Here, we define each and provide an example to situate how line staff perceptions of frontline supervisors’ macro level power misaligns with frontline supervisors’ feelings of disempowerment. Instead, frontline supervisors assert power on the micro level, which reinforces the impression among officers that their supervisors wield power in macro level ways.

STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS LOOKING UP

The majority of street-level officers perceive that their immediate supervisor exercises significant power and authority, especially regarding policy. Street-level staff view frontline supervisors as playing a critical role in policy making. In this way, many street-level officers view their frontline supervisors as “company men” or “towing the company line.” During the focus groups with street-level officers, a sense of mistrust and concern emerged over whom (in upper management) their immediate frontline supervisor was talking to about issues in the office and also over their frontline supervisor’s ability to effectively deal with staff concerns. One example illustrating the use (or misuse, according to street-level officers) of such power concerned report writing. The following excerpt of a dialogue between two street-level officers in the focus group, Mila and Gavin, details the incident:

Mila says that her frontline supervisor will re-do her report and sign her name. She says she e-mailed him about it and he responded that “I’m your supervisor and I can do what I want.” Mila says, “If he had come to me, I might have felt differently.” Gavin asked if she still feels like it’s her report, and she says “Well she’s never had the problem before [with other supervisors].” She learned that he does it with other people. Everyone else in the room is shocked and saying “That’s not right.”

Mila describes how the frontline supervisor’s style of changing the reports without consulting street-level officers is not personal, as he does it with all employees, but it contributes to her perception of the frontline supervisor’s power over her. Moreover, the fact that Mila has not experienced this before bolsters her impression that the frontline supervisor wields ultimate authority. This frontline supervisor serves as a gatekeeper between street-level officers and upper administration, framing the information that upper administration receives about what is happening with supervised offenders. In the next excerpt, Mila goes on to describe her feelings about the roles and responsibilities of frontline supervisors and middle managers in the organization while other street-level officers, Caleb and Gavin, reflect the “tip-toeing” they do to avoid upsetting higher-ups and risking their jobs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Power</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Power over “big picture” functions, such as policy making, dissemination, and oversight of operations</td>
<td>Passing things up to middle and upper managers and down to line staff via the chain of command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro</td>
<td>Asserting power over individual tasks or responsibilities</td>
<td>Setting personal standard for the writing of reports</td>
</tr>
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Mila says that [being a frontline supervisor is] more than just clicking e-mails and correcting case plans. I know I could never do that job because you have to be a company man, and I would fight for my people. Maybe when you get that job, it washes out, I don’t know. When he changed my report (and other people chime in and say “that’s outrageous”) … it’s just normal now. I saved and printed that e-mail because I never have been talked to like that before. Caleb says that everyone is adversarial to him. But he always has an adversarial relationship because when push comes to shove, they’ll (the organization) cut you loose. Gavin says that you have to be really politically correct around your supervisors because they’ll get you.

Echoing Mila, other street-level officers discuss issues of trust between themselves and their frontline supervisors because of their perceptions of frontline supervisors’ power and authority over them. In these discussions, frontline supervisors, as gatekeepers, have the ability to disrupt and rupture the relationship between the organization and street-level officers, who are simultaneously the most vulnerable employees and the ultimate policy makers representing the organization with probationers and the community. Another officer, Ellaria, describes how she perceives frontline supervisors as exerting power without having complete knowledge concerning particular street-level officers or their job duties. Ellaria says, “They are bringing frontline supervisors straight off the street and they are challenging [street-level] officers every day with things they know nothing about.” This reflects a dynamic created when street-level officers are quickly promoted to fill supervisory roles, giving them power before they have “earned” it. In this case, the authority displayed by the supervisor is seen as artificially produced and illegitimate, potentially affecting the pathways of policy to practice because officers might deviate in ways that could increase inequities in the delivery of services.

Aside from these issues concerning the legitimacy of quickly promoted frontline supervisors, some street-level officers feel that their supervisors do not trust them and find ways to “keep tabs on them.” This represents another form of perceived power afforded to supervisors. For example, in another focus group, officers Mhaegen and Roslin discuss their frontline supervisor:

Mhaegen says that [staff in her office] used to have weekly meetings, but Roslin says that it was a “control meeting” to make sure that people came back from court on Friday instead of skipping out. It was belittling, especially if you’re doing your job.

Mhaegen suggests that the frontline supervisor felt employees were being dishonest about their time by not returning to the office after attending court hearings held on Fridays. To officers, the implementation of a meeting on Friday afternoons represented a misappropriation of power on the part of the frontline supervisor, implicating all street-level employees in misconduct instead of a few.

Finally, some street-level officers felt that power plays by frontline supervisors were also related to gender. For example, Caleb says, “It’s a control thing. I’d rather have a male supervisor.” He claims he has only had problems with female supervisors—specifically, “micromanaging, control-type behavior, going by the book too much, not thinking outside the box.” Though not a focus of this analysis, gender emerged as an underlying context of street-level officers’ perceptions of their frontline supervisors’ power. The majority (65 percent) of frontline supervisors in this sample are female, and officers and supervisors made specific claims regarding how gender plays out within the organization. This type of micromanaging was seen as a female trait, but it nonetheless reflects officers’ perceptions of frontline supervisors’ ultimate authority over their jobs.

Frontline supervisors and street-level officers discuss the differences in communication styles between male and female employees. A male frontline supervisor, Isaiah, discusses...
allowing his street-level officers to have input: “I have all women in my office, so you know I have to let them talk.” In this instance, and in others related to gender, characteristics perceived as problematic are attributed to all women rather than to individuals. This is in stark contrast to negative discussions of male supervisors. If a male supervisor is perceived as problematic, it is always related to his individual personality or demeanor; a female supervisor or agent’s traits, on the other hand, are seen as representative of the female gender. This occurred throughout our trainings and focus groups, regardless of the fact that the organization’s staff at both the agent and the frontline supervisor level is majority female.

In a similar example, officers discussing issues within their offices during a focus group attribute a number of negative issues to the number of women in their offices. The following field note excerpt begins with a discussion of the gender composition of the office:

“In our office, there are only six guys out of 40–45 women in the office.” Natalie says they have six females and one male. Finn says, “All the issues are female to female, women to women. They all joke and laugh about not opening the door but he says it’s true. Frontline supervisor vs. frontline supervisor, frontline supervisor vs. senior officer, etc. They gripe about this issue.” Caleb says that they’re more territorial. The researcher asks him to clarify, and William says all females and laughs uncomfortably. Finn agrees.

Here, when discussing specific issues of territorial tendencies, griping, etc., the officers attribute these traits not just to the women in their office but to women in general. Some go on to note that they would prefer to work for a male supervisor and have fewer women in the office. Many of the street-level officers’ discussions focus on stereotypes of women generally and of female bosses in particular. These traits overlap and are intertwined with negative discussions of frontline supervisors as micromanaging and petty in their use of their power as supervisors.

FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS’ FEELINGS OF DISEMPOWERMENT

In contrast to street-level officers’ perceptions that their supervisors hold similar levels of power as mid- and upper-level management, frontline supervisors feel disempowered in their role as leaders. This results from a lack of decision-making power with regard to daily issues as well as with regard to policy influence. They do not feel that they have the authority of the state to back their actions within the organization. Additionally, they feel disempowered due to their perception that, in fact, street-level officers hold considerable power over their daily lives. In the frontline supervisor role, participants report feeling pressured in both directions. Claire states, “Officers are controlling what we do during the day. And upper management controls what we do during the day.” Frontline supervisors feel at the whim of both upper management and the needs of street-level staff. As Jillian puts it, “Officers are often more empowered than frontline supervisors. They forget that they have a lot of power with what can get done.” Disempowerment is felt in many different ways, but three patterns emerged that reflect the experience of most frontline supervisors: lack of policy influence, disciplinary procedures, and bypassing the chain of command.

Lack of Policy Influence

Frontline supervisors note their perceived inability to affect policy or influence agency change. They do not feel that they have the authority to affect real policy change in the
organization because the edicts from above are mere passed through and not vetted, and street-level officers are the ultimate purveyors of policy implementation. During the training sessions there was much discussion about the dissemination and implementation of policy. Frontline supervisors argue that they are caught in a vice trying to adhere to directives from above, reconcile their own beliefs about policy, present policy to street-level staff, and then follow up with superiors to share street-level staff concerns. At the heart of their feelings about power, frontline supervisors note the tension between their position residing at the street-level while holding management responsibilities and their desire to have their voices heard. For example, Lavell states that “They [upper management] need input from us. We are the worker bees. We should be included when there is a policy change.” However, at one point another frontline supervisor, Ashton, in response to a question posed by the trainer, says, “We can’t answer your question [about how to solve a problem] because, as Lavell said, we are the worker bees. We don’t have any control over our situation. All we can do is make it comfortable for the [street-level] officers while they’re there.” Ashton argues that “worker bees” do not have the power to change their situations or to solve policy dilemmas. Ashton notes that he tries to make things as palatable as possible for his employees, but he does not see himself as an authoritative or empowered manager in the organization. As frontline supervisors see themselves as “worker bees,” they position themselves as street-level workers similar to the SLBs Lipsky (1980) investigated, but without the discretion inherent in frontline action. Similar to SLBs, frontline supervisors have inherent discretion but do not perceive that discretion as a source of power.

The tensions experienced by frontline supervisors in policy dissemination were also discussed at other times during the training sessions. For example, the trainer provided the participants with several options for how to handle a situation when street-level staff members disagree with a policy. One frontline supervisor, Phoebe, began the discussion:

“We’re not in a position to do that” in response to the idea [proposed by others] saying “I’d like to negotiate with you on this issue so we can come up with a solution that suits everyone.” Phoebe says, “It’s not ‘Let’s make a deal’ for us.” The room ultimately argued that you have to do “strict enforcement” but act like “I’ll try to work with management and make sure that you’re heard.” Isaiah says, “That’s not how we do stuff around here.”

During this discussion, there is disagreement among frontline supervisors about how much authority and decision-making power they actually have with regard to policy. Many agree that they have little influence, while several individuals argued that they could at least affect how policy is disseminated. These few individuals begin to link their role as policy gatekeeper with their role as policy implementer by considering how they might influence the dissemination of policy to their staff. Aside from these few, the majority of other frontline supervisors discussed how their lack of ability to affect policy made them feel inadequate in their roles. In addition, frontline supervisors argued that this situation gives the wrong impression to street-level staff:

Ivy says we just have to follow the [upper management]; we tell [street-level] officers, “Just follow it.” Owen says you have to tell [officers], “It’s not us,” and he uses a lot of hand gestures referring to the other frontline supervisors. He says it’s hard to be taken seriously when you’re a walking contradiction.

Here, Owen reflects on how he attempts to distance himself from upper management, who make policy decisions that contrast with the realities of daily correctional supervision. As a disempowered go-between, Owen must attempt to address staff concerns, share
their voice, and reconcile his own dilemma with being an ineffective manager in these situations. In general, frontline supervisors desire more information about policy making along with greater input so that they can be effective leaders able to display the macro power that officers believe they have. This is clearly demonstrated in another example from a training session, in which Ariana says,

I want to know what can I do (Eloise and Lavell agree). It’s about empowerment so we don’t have to ask an [upper manager]. It appears that the frontline supervisor has lost authority. If they don’t empower us to make big decisions, we’re not going to be that person that the [street-level] officers want us to be.

Discipline Procedures

The second way in which frontline supervisors discuss feeling disempowered concerns the perception that street-level officers have greater power due to the flexibility in their schedules, their capped forty-hour workweeks, and the strength of the union in sustaining jobs for underperforming officers. Discipline of street-level officers is a poignant issue for frontline supervisors because they feel unsupported unsupported by upper management in initiating disciplinary action. In essence, frontline supervisors reported feeling that they have no power to regulate and assess the performance of their subordinates. Describing the discipline process for an underperforming officer, Lavell says, “All we do is move [street-level officers] to another office, and we need some more teeth in the discipline. They need to be suspended without pay or something. We need to get their attention.” For Lavell and other frontline supervisors, there is a power struggle with poorly performing officers when it comes to discipline. They perceive that street-level officers know that there is little recourse for frontline supervisors to discipline officers and that the likely consequence is that they will be moved to another office rather than terminated.

Further, frontline officers discuss how the lack of clarity in the discipline process makes them feel disempowered. Their responsibility in these situations is to document each alleged infraction, which adds to their workload. Ultimately, they pass the information up the chain of command but are not involved in the decision-making process about how to handle a problem employee. To add complexity to the power struggle related to discipline, frontline supervisors report feeling uncertain about pursuing discipline for fear of being disciplined themselves as a result of the problem officer. In the following excerpt, several frontline managers characterize this concern. At one focus group, Autumn says,

“Lately, everything that’s filtered down to us is about discipline, and it’s frightening. We live in fear that we’ll get sanctioned, that our [street-level] officers will, and it’s horrible.” Alexandra adds, “We have all these people saying do it because I said so, but you have all these educated people who have questions, and you don’t have all of these answers. I feel like I’m the parent or they’re (the officer) the offender.” Molly says she thinks the offender gets treated better than they do. Charles explains that if your street-level officer does something, the frontline supervisor gets disciplined, too. There is a lot of agreement with this. Charles adds that you need to go to other frontline supervisors and ask for examples. Autumn says that anyone who was called out before was afraid to say anything now.

The same issues are highlighted in another focus group with frontline supervisors. Frontline supervisors say that even when they have documented everything they still have not had resolution to certain discipline issues. The following excerpt is from a focus group where the researcher opens with a very simple question:
“What was the most striking issue you dealt with as a frontline supervisor?” Cora replies, “Personnel issues are what make the job so hard.” And several people agree. The researcher asks for an example. Cora explains that they don’t get a lot of support when they’re trying to deal with a street-level officer who is not performing. Several people audibly agree. Eloise confirms, “Yep, yep.” She developed a binder [of disciplinary documents] and learned it and used it as an example, and in the end nothing was done about that person. Carol says, “And then you’re stuck with that person.” Eloise says, “This person decided to leave, but I’ve done that with several people over the years.” She indicated that they can’t really get rid of people; they just have to wait until they want to leave.

Disciplinary issues are especially complex in this organization because of the bureaucratic tensions and the street-level officers’ union. These internal and external forces are constantly at odds over personnel issues, contributing to frontline supervisors’ perception that they stand powerless in the middle.

**Bypassing the Chain of Command**

A primary contributor to frontline supervisors’ feelings of disempowerment is the practice of “bypassing.” According to the frontline supervisors, bypassing occurs when a street-level officer seeks out assistance or advice from the mid- or upper-level manager rather than from their immediate supervisor. Frontline supervisors described this as “answer-hopping,” referring to instances in which street level officers go above their superiors when they receive an answer they do not like or when they have a problem that they feel their superior cannot answer. Because the upper manager generally engages the street-level officer in the discussion, frontline supervisors reported feeling that this undermines their authority. Frontline supervisors describe the effects of bypassing in one training session on problems in the office:

Leah immediately identified that the problem with officers is that they do not follow the chain of command. Parker said that the cause of the conflict is that the [upper manager] is not respecting the frontline supervisor’s position. The chain of command is one thing, but respect is another. That happens all the time. Alexandra started talking and saying that the street-level officer thinks the [frontline supervisor] is too new and not knowledgeable enough to answer, so she just went to the [upper manager], just because the [frontline supervisor] is new.

In this exchange, the issue of bypassing is connected to frontline supervisors’ feelings of being disrespected and their concern that this renders their power illegitimate. In another exchange during a training session, frontline supervisors detail the problem of bypassing while also illustrating the additional problems created when the upper-level manager agrees to engage the street-level officer without consulting with the frontline supervisor. In the next field note excerpt, LaDonna (the trainer) and several frontline supervisors are discussing the issue of a street-level officer who had gone to upper management to discuss a new policy that the officer is dissatisfied with and feels is unclear:

LaDonna: “I just want us to put ourselves in the place of this street-level officer.”

**Eden:** “But the outcome not going to change, so she needs to know she’s not the authority and it is out of your hands. You’re not the authority."

**Isaiah:** “But we don’t know how the [upper manager] handles the street-level officer.”

LaDonna: “You guys are able to articulate this a lot better than the officer, but that makes sense, it is your role. What is it the [upper manager] needs?”
Isaiah: “To stay in her lane.” LaDonna asked everyone to put themselves in the upper manager’s shoes.

Sienna: “Her door was open, and she had to listen to [the street-level officer], but then she needed to go back to [the frontline supervisors] and say to [the street-level officer], I hear your concerns, and I understand your frustrations, however, we’ll all sit down and discuss. It isn’t going to change anything, but this would be a way to do it in this scenario.”

LaDonna: “Why would they do it a different way?”

Sienna: “To undermine the [frontline supervisor].”

Alexandra: “I am not a big fan of the open door policy, because it leads to this kind of stuff. My people know that I will tell them that if I can’t do something then please go up the chain of the command. But, you have to go through the process.”

Other frontline supervisors felt that a street-level officer bypassing them causes problems in the office, affecting both relationships and culture. In this excerpt, Ava describes how difficult it is when officers ignore the chain of command:

Ava brings up the point that the officers shouldn’t come around the [upper manager]. She adds, “Because I have experienced this, it can cause tension between officers and frontline supervisors because they feel like they can bypass you (the frontline supervisor). This is my team.”

Ava concludes by claiming ownership of “her team” and alludes to the threat to her authority that occurs when an officer seeks input from the upper manager. In this way, she tries to assert herself as a gatekeeper between street-level officers and the organization, a position that leads to her feeling more empowered. Officers bypassing their frontline supervisors to address an issue with an upper manager only increases the tensions emerging from the frontline supervisors’ lack of influence and authority, further stripping the frontline supervisors of the authority associated with their position.

The final example of bypassing involves the nature of seasoned versus new street-level officers. In this instance, when tenured street-level officers bypassed the frontline supervisor it signified something different than if a new street-level officer had done it. The issue of staff tenure and familiarity with those in management roles added to the complexity of bypassing:

The group says that it’s not new officers that are the problem; it’s the people who have been around a while. Alice says they have a hard time adapting [to a new frontline supervisor]. They get disgruntled, and it’s hard dealing with someone set in their ways. Elijah says, “The sniper,” and the whole group agrees. They go behind your back and shoot you. For example, they go to your [upper manager] behind your back. Noah says an open door to [the upper manager] is bad because officers just go to them if they don’t agree with the [frontline supervisor]. Everyone in the room seems to have that problem. Alice says that sometimes they go over your head, and then the [upper manager] doesn’t even come to you, so you don’t know what’s going on. Liam says that when an officer goes to an [upper manager], the [upper manager] shouldn’t just say yes to the officer without talking to the [frontline supervisor]. Officers get the idea that they can go behind your back and get what they want. Elijah says it’s supposed to work like an escalation desk, like in customer service. You need to have the opportunity to address it, and there is a chain that is followed. Noah says that jumping the chain makes the [frontline supervisor] ineffective.

MICRO LEVEL POWER ASSERTIONS BY FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS

Despite feeling disempowered, frontline supervisors exert their power in micro level ways, setting standards of work, scheduling unit meetings, working “better with fewer resources,” and having knowledge of their officers’ caseloads. These micro assertions of
power (Rouleau 2005) seem to have little to do with official state authority or explicit policy making, but in small ways they do allow frontline supervisors to assert control. In this way, frontline supervisors assume the features of street-level workers by using the discretion inherent in their position to affect policy making at the implementation stage. The most common way in which frontline supervisors reported asserting their power was by setting individualized standards for work performance in their office that go above the agency requirements and then serving as models for this behavior. Numerous frontline supervisors offered opinions:

I think it’s one of those things, “Do what I do,” and if they [the officers] are aware, they will do what you do.” Another says, “Modeling consistency.” Another frontline supervisor adds, “Modeling is . . . I also think you set the standard. You stay there.”

One specific way in which frontline supervisors exert their authority concerns street-level officer report writing. Street-level officers are responsible for a myriad of reports about offenders’ behavior and probation or parole status, and frontline supervisors are largely responsible for reading and approving these reports. As a major function of the street-level officer’s job, and as highlighted by officers in the focus groups, this was one area of considerable influence for frontline supervisors. While officers saw this behavior as micromanaging, frontline supervisors saw it as a key method for influencing the quality of reports and ultimately the quality of offender supervision. One frontline supervisor, Charlotte, describes how she established her standards for report writing early on and developed a reputation for demanding excellence:

Charlotte talks about how her whole office hated her at first, but some of them are coming along. She says that they said at the last staff meeting “Can we get at least one case through?” And she replied with a stern, “Yes, if it’s right.”

In this way, Charlotte is the gatekeeper for the information officers are gathering at the street level, which becomes part of the organization’s formal records. While report writing standards constitute a small area in which frontline supervisors can assert their authority, these standards have a significant impact on potential outcomes for probationers and parolees and on what becomes the written record of the organization and usable knowledge for policy makers and upper managers.

Another example demonstrates the complexity of the power dynamic surrounding praise. Frontline supervisors can use praise as a power tool, but this tool is limited in how meaningful it actually is to street-level staff members due to frontline supervisors’ lack of authority. Frontline supervisors in one training session describe how at times upper management will interfere with their decisions to commend a street-level officer for a job well done, or how at other times they will not support a positive action, feeling instead that if frontline supervisors uphold their standards regardless, respect from subordinates will follow:

Mark (the trainer) asks “Why are we not doing more praise?” Henry says that they are like toothless bulldogs. They can say “good job” all they want, the [upper manager] can override it. Jack says that their praise doesn’t have any meaning because [officers] feel that they’re only hearing it from the [frontline supervisors], but they’re not hearing it from anyone else and maybe they respect you . . . he has a hard time explaining this. Elijah says that if you hold yourself to high standards as a [frontline supervisor], and that flows down so that when you do give praise out, it means something and it has value.

While discipline is a thorny issue for frontline supervisors and one way in which they discuss being disempowered, it also emerges as a method of regaining some control. In
this way, some frontline supervisors report recalibrating their power over discipline and becoming very diligent in documenting problem employees. In the following example, Hazel discusses the dilemma of dealing with an underperforming street-level officer and negotiating disciplinary tactics:

Hazel makes the point that we are an agency of record keeping. “You (the street-level officer) gotta at least make a note that you made the contact.” She talks about an officer that appeared to have missed “a ton of” contacts. She gave the officer discipline, but in talking to her she realized that the officer knew everything about every offender. She had been making the contacts but not putting them in the case notes. She then coached the officer on how to better keep her records. She said that even if she just notes a visit in the case notes then as a [frontline supervisor] she can say she had a conversation with the officer and all of this came out, so she can mitigate the discipline for the officer. She said that the discipline came with coaching, and that was what it meant to be a leader to her.

In this instance, Hazel exerted her authority in the documentation of discipline as per policy but also exerted her power through mentoring and coaching, recognizing the officer’s strength as a case manager despite her weakness in following protocol. She focused on record keeping and on making sure that there was a way to translate what was happening on the street level up through the organization via reports. The frontline supervisor is the gatekeeper to the official record keeping and history of the agency. In addition to their ability to recognize and encourage good case management, frontline supervisors make records of how well (or not) street-level bureaucrats carry out their jobs, which become records the organization relies on to assess performance.

Frontline supervisors also have the authority to decide which disciplinary actions they enforce. Jillian describes how she realized that being a stickler for policy was not contributing to her authority in her office but instead was diminishing it:

Jillian explains that she used to have a reputation as being a supervisor who got people terminated, so a lot of street-level officers were afraid of her. She says, “I followed policy until I wised up.” There are a few snickers. She continues, “No seriously, you have to understand what the agency wants, and the agency doesn’t want people to be fired.”

Jillian realized that she had the power to choose when to report policy violations up the chain of command and when to keep them quiet and earn the trust and respect of her street-level officers. This not only made her job easier and more manageable but also fundamentally shifted her power. She was now the gatekeeper between information on the ground and upper management as well as highly influential in street-level staffing decisions, deciding who would stay and serve as the outward facing agents of state power.

Finally, frontline supervisors detailed how they chose to supervise their officers’ case management of probationers and parolees by engaging in informal methods of “staffing” cases. In one example, frontline supervisor Sadie describes a method she learned from a previous supervisor about how to assert power through staffing cases with her street-level officers:

Sadie had a supervisor she really liked. He would pick a case and call her into his office and say, “Tell me about John Smith.” He wanted to know that his street-level officers knew the people they were supervising. He would talk through the cases with his officers and they would brainstorm how to move it forward. It was really helpful. That’s what it’s all about for the officers. The casework.

Many frontline supervisors reported asserting their influence over case management by coaching their staff to supervise cases in ways modeled on the supervisors’ individual
beliefs about effective offender supervision. This mechanism serves as a path to influence, both directly and indirectly affecting the experience and potential outcomes for offenders, as frontline supervisors would be directly involved in decision making for offenders, interpreting policies related to their supervision, and relying on their own street-level experience to legitimize their authority.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Using data from ethnographic observations and focus groups with frontline supervisors and their street-level officers, we explored the power relationships between these positions in a statewide community corrections organization. Our findings suggest that frontline supervisors wield their authority through micro level power moves that significantly impact the implementation of corrections policies and practices on the organization and staff, on offender supervision, and, ultimately, on public safety. While street-level officers perceive frontline supervisors to be authoritative leaders with influence on policy making and broad management decision-making powers, frontline supervisors feel stymied by the constraints of the organizational hierarchy and management philosophies. Primarily, frontline supervisors discussed feeling disempowered with regard to the very domains in which officers feel they have authority: policy influence and disciplinary action. Despite feeling disempowered, analysis reveals that frontline supervisors exert power on the micro level via different job responsibilities. Rather than relying on formal authority or legitimate power via the state, frontline supervisors focus on small workplace activities they can control in order to assert micro level power. Using these strategies, frontline supervisors exert significant influence over the implementation of correctional policies and over both individual-level and organizational outcomes. Frontline supervisors serve as the gatekeepers for how information from the street level filters up to upper-level managers and policy makers while framing the conditions under which street-level officers work as the “ultimate policy makers” (Lipsky 1980) on behalf of the state. Our findings suggest that frontline officers bridge these roles not only by serving as gatekeepers to upper management but also by shaping the environment of street-level work via micro power moves that are discretionary rather than policy focused.

The findings of this research build upon prior studies by Hepburn (1985) and Steiner et al. (2012) by examining the power relationships in justice organizations among staff rather than between staff and offenders. While earlier work on power examines the types of authority exerted by staff over inmates in a prison (Hepburn 1985) and parolees on community supervision (Steiner et al. 2012), this study considers the power relationships between frontline supervisors and street-level officers in community corrections. Our findings reflect the ongoing tension between the SLB and the frontline supervisor to achieve community corrections goals while navigating the complexities of state bureaucracies and the ever-changing sociopolitical importance of the criminal justice system. The state in which the organization we studied is located may have political and contextual factors that limit the generalizability of these findings, and future research should expand the contexts and locations in which frontline supervisors are studied. Future research should also consider how the types of power elaborated on by scholars coalesce with the types of power exhibited in correctional staff relationships. For example, some characteristics of our study findings allude to dimensions of Hepburn’s (1985) conceptions of legitimate and expert power; however, there is less evidence of coercive, reward, and referent power. It is possible that similar yet different types of power better describe the relationship between supervisors and staff than those previously developed, and these would be worthy of investigation.
Similarly, other work suggests considering the organizational setting and individual-level characteristics of staff in understanding power and authority. In a study of welfare caseworkers, Petter et al. (2002) found that the antecedents to managers experiencing empowerment include a supportive culture, inspirational leadership, and interpersonal trust. Staff who felt free to be creative in the way they managed cases and had autonomy and flexibility to develop their own schedules also felt more empowered. These empowerment factors were not detected in the data used for this study. However, it can be inferred from the frontline supervisors’ descriptions of feeling disempowered, and from the corroboration of these experiences by their subordinates, that the strict hierarchical structure of the organization inhibits a supportive culture. The misalignment of power perceptions creates tensions between officers and their supervisors, reflecting the lack of leadership qualities inspiring and motivating work. It also contributes to a lack of trust, as evidenced by the common practice of bypassing the chain of command. This misalignment of power perceptions also creates an environment in which authority is wielded via micro level power moves, obfuscating traditional understandings of policy implementation and potentially leading to significant gaps between intention and implementation in corrections policy. Future research should investigate the antecedents of empowerment in these types of organizations and should consider the individual experiences of workers occupying different levels of a multilayered hierarchy.

Frontline supervisors’ reports of feelings of disempowerment in this study align with similar findings from other studies about role conflict, stress, organizational commitment, and ideological tensions (Lambert et al. 2015; Lambert, Hogan, and Griffin 2008). For example, decision making is an important feature of positive and effective organizational operation (Lambert et al. 2015; Minor et al. 2014), but in this study street-level officers and frontline supervisors held contradictory perceptions. While street-level officers felt that frontline supervisors played a substantive role in policy decision making, frontline supervisors felt no power or influence in policy making. They reported that their decision-making ability is relegated to workplace framing that feels minor in relation to correctional policy but that has consequences in how policies are shaped and carried out. This is similar to research on middle managers and frontline workers in service industries and private companies (see, e.g., Lopez 2010; Rouleau 2005). The implications of this are significant: first, improved and transparent decision making by frontline supervisors in policy enactment could improve both the overall functioning of day-to-day operations within the entire agency and the authority these frontline supervisors feel. In this case, including frontline supervisors in the development and enactment of policy might provide a more comprehensive—and practical—initiative that can be implemented with fidelity. By giving frontline supervisors a transparent role in policy-making decisions, organizations may be able to avoid any unintended policy consequences of frontline supervisors’ micro level power moves. Second, the officers’ impression that their supervisors have significant influence via macro levels of power may reflect the actual decision-making power exerted by different levels of staff within a particular office regarding policy. That is, there may be differences within individual offices in how policy is enacted that are related to other factors unobserved in this study. Understanding how the perceptions of both street-level officers and frontline supervisors during policy implementation relate to overall perceptions of power and authority, and even to policy implementation success, is important for future research.

The complexity of the organizational and individual level tension here is most substantively reflected in the misalignment of street-level officers and frontline supervisors’ expectations of power relationships, and this is especially evident with regard to the issue of bypassing. Bypassing is an issue particularly related to hierarchical organizational
structures and represents an assertion of power on the part of street-level staff (Jervis 2002). In the current study, the fact that both street-level officers and the frontline supervisors are aware of the practice of bypassing demonstrates that this practice exists unchecked and undermines the authority of frontline supervisors. Street-level officers discussed frontline supervisors wielding considerable power related to disciplinary action while frontline supervisors discussed feeling ineffective due to street-level officers bypassing the chain of command when there was conflict or a disciplinary issue. This continued power struggle undermines the integrity and fidelity of implementation initiatives: line staff feel micromanaged by supervisors and may exhibit resistance, and supervisors are navigating pressures coming from both the top-down and the bottom-up. This behavior has implications for the chain of command procedures used in correctional organizations, suggesting that more transparent structures and communication protocols, both up and down the chain, should be in place to facilitate the unified implementation of policies and practices (Kassing 2009).

Empowering frontline supervisors in correctional agencies has the potential to lead to improved managerial practices and could have positive impacts on the evidence-based supervision of offenders. In this study, frontline supervisors relied on their knowledge and expertise in supervising offenders to regain control in their positions. Their “mastery” of offender supervision strategies and the “tricks of the trade” afforded them agency and possibly improved self-efficacy (Taxman 2002). In particular, this occurred through an emphasis on daily tasks, such as report writing, over which frontline supervisors had direct supervisory control. Organizational research suggests that when managers feel powerless in certain situations, they develop “micro-strategies” (Rouleau 2005) that assist with coping and with reasserting authority. In this case, reliance on their previous experiences of both the organizational environment and offender supervision practices allowed frontline supervisors to retain control over the day-to-day practices of their subordinates, both asserting power and directly impacting offender outcomes. Other research suggests that employee mastery is linked with the intrinsic motivation to pursue agency goals (Kuvaas and Dysvik 2009), and understanding how this manifests in the daily work of frontline supervisors could provide significant insight into the mechanisms by which policies and practices are adhered to and implemented.

This study is not without limitations. First, as is true with many qualitative research designs, the results are not generalizable to all frontline supervisors in community corrections agencies. The results here do provide, however, a grounded theory about frontline supervisors’ sense and use of power that should be tested or examined in other bureaucratic organizations. It is possible that the ways in which frontline supervisors discussed their feelings of disempowerment and exertion of power are influenced by other organizational or contextual factors, which would come to light when comparing across agencies or contexts. In particular, both street-level officers and frontline supervisors discussed issues related to gender. Discussions of gender were similar to other organizational contexts (see Acker 1990 for a full discussion) but warrant further investigation given the presence of a majority female workforce within the traditionally male context of corrections. Second, this project focused on processes of supervision and does not include outcome data. While we can report on the how and can begin to discuss the why of frontline supervision, we are limited in what we can say about the effects of these practices.

Overall, this study contributes to the small but growing body of literature exploring the roles and power of frontline supervisors and middle managers in criminal justice agencies. More specifically, this article works to alleviate the current dearth of knowledge about the power and authority frontline supervisors wield within an organization and how this power is perceived and influences the daily practices of staff in community corrections agencies. In their role as “go-betweens” in the organization, frontline supervisors have...
considerable power and influence over the manner in which correctional policy is interpreted, executed, and ultimately mediated in action, potentially affecting the experiences and outcomes of those being served by community corrections. Although frontline supervisors occupy an important space within organizations, they are still rarely studied and largely undertheorized, thus making the question of how the frontline supervisor’s power intersects with correctional policy implementation an important area of research.

NOTES

1. While literature in this area discusses middle managers as well as supervisors, we use the term frontline supervisors throughout our work. The organization we explore has multiple layers of management and supervision, but here we concentrate on the first level of management immediately supervising street-level workers and answering to managers and policy makers above them.

2. Twenty-five of the seventy-five frontline supervisors participating in focus groups did not attend the training. Despite this, their comments reflecting power, authority, and microstrategies are consistent with those who attended the training. In this case, there were no differences with regard to this study between those who did and did not attend training.

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Good bosses matter—now more than ever. Here are a few ways to cultivate better leadership at scale and be better leaders ourselves.

Before the pandemic, 75 percent of Americans saw their boss as the most stressful aspect of their job. The coronavirus has put both bosses and employees all over the world under even more stress. During a McKinsey Live webinar, Tera Allas, director of research and economics, and Bill Schaninger, a senior partner, discussed the vital role bosses
play in employee satisfaction and organizational success—and some concrete steps leaders at all levels can take to improve.

Research has shown that job satisfaction is the second most important determinant, after mental health, of an employee’s overall satisfaction with life—and satisfied employees have a positive impact on company performance. The presenters noted that organizations with better employee engagement, and what they call “organizational health,” have lower staff turnover, higher customer loyalty and satisfaction, higher productivity and profitability, and, ultimately, higher shareholder returns.

What makes employees happy and engaged? It turns out bosses—or managers—are a critical factor. And, although the employee-manager relationship was important before, it intensified during the COVID-19 crisis, when tailoring work routines to individuals’ needs and maintaining social connections made an enormous difference in workers’ productivity and well-being.

Being a good boss isn’t easy. A Gallup study suggested that only 10 percent of people naturally have all the traits required to be a great manager. The good news is that many of these skills can be learned.

At an individual level, there are a few steps bosses can take—first and foremost, treat their team members as human beings and understand on an emotional level how to support them. Bosses should focus on being kind (when employees perceive compassion from their leaders, they become more loyal to them), thankful (celebrating small achievements sets up a dynamic of everyone wanting to do better), positive (it builds employee confidence and reinforces beneficial behaviors), and aware of the need to take care of their own physical and emotional well-being. Although these guidelines may seem simple and self-evident, they’re often easier said than done in high-stress situations.
There are also things that organizations can do to create an environment that enables good management and makes it easier for bosses to be better:

- **Understanding and conviction**: Foster an environment where it’s OK to talk about the enormous positive and negative impact leaders have on the lives of the people who report to them and the role they play in dealing with employee grief, stress, and emotions.

- **Role modeling**: Identify and remove biases and actions within the organization that undermine relationships between bosses and their teams.

- **Confidence and skill building**: Provide bosses with training programs and opportunities to behave differently. There are ways for everyone to build empathy, mindfulness, and self-awareness.

- **Reinforcement mechanisms**: Praise and promote the managers with strong servant-leader traits, and make employee satisfaction a core part of the company’s performance evaluations.

Without these reinforcing mechanisms in place, leadership behavior is unlikely to change. And, without change, businesses are unlikely to tap into the positive potential of their people.

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**Questions and answers from the webinar**

1. **How should bosses address the psychological safety of employees?**
   
   A recent McKinsey survey showed that psychological safety is more
likely to exist when a team leader creates a positive team climate through frequent supportive and consultative actions.

A leader needs to solicit input from team members and consider their opinions about issues affecting them, practice situational and cultural awareness, learn to put their people's success ahead of their own, and develop what we call “situational humility,” a mindset of curiosity and personal growth. All these behaviors create an environment where employees feel comfortable asking for help, sharing suggestions, or challenging the status quo, which in turn allows organizations to innovate quickly, unlock the benefits of diversity, and adapt well to change.

For more on this topic and the survey, see the article “Psychological safety and the critical role of leadership development.”

2. **Middle managers are under extraordinary duress themselves.**

   **How is executive leadership engaging and coaching managers at work?**

Bosses need to understand and convey to middle managers that their primary role is coaching, leading, and developing people. As the connective tissue of the organization, middle managers need ongoing professional development in apprenticeship and coaching. These responsibilities are not incremental activities; they should be at the core of the job.

Because middle-management roles are often nebulous, bosses need to make very clear to middle managers that they’re no longer there to “do” the job at hand but rather to lead the people who are doing the job. The company should also give managers the skills and capacity to develop their organization’s next generation of leaders.
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Managerial Success and Failure in the Law Firm Context

Introduction & Rationale

by Mary Gardner Burelle, MSLOC Student

The purpose of this study is to explore the success and failure of mid-level attorney managers in becoming senior attorney managers in law firms (i.e., the success and failure of senior associates and junior or “non-equity” partners in becoming law firm “owners,” also known as senior or “equity” partners). The specific question I am examining is: What are the key managerial success and derailment themes of mid-level attorney managers in the law firm context? I have three basic hypotheses related to this question:

- first, there will be a difference between the perceived quality of the managerial skills of successful mid-level attorney managers who get promoted (“successors”) and those who fail (“derailers”);

- second, the perceived quality of the managerial skills of successors will exceed those of the derailers; and

- third, managerial skills in the law firm context are related to one another.

Lawyers and law firms are of particular interest in the management context because of the natural tension between the practicing law firm lawyer and the manager. Lawyers in law firms charge by the hour and are expected to obtain measurable results – whether it is the upper hand in business negotiations or a “win” in the courtroom – in a short period of time. Due to high billing rates (e.g., as high as $1,000 per hour for senior Partners), clients pay close attention to attorney time and demand efficient and cost-effective legal work. In addition, most attorneys are subject
to constant deadlines. For example, trial attorneys are subject to specific filing deadlines mandated by procedural rules in every case, while corporate attorneys must work within tight turnaround timelines set by law and custom in the transactions upon which they work. Thus, law firm attorneys are naturally focused on responding to the short-term pressures of the specific work they do, current client demands and developing new client relationships.

In contrast, a typical manager role involves a long-term strategic focus on financial outcomes, return on investments or maximizing profits. The skills needed to achieve managerial success are distinct from those needed to achieve other types of professional success in that they are not technical or operational in nature, such as those needed for success in engineering, manufacturing or even the practice of law. Managerial skills are instead inherently connected to the unpredictable world of human interaction. Typically, an individual who achieves a managerial role is someone who was once (and often still is) a stellar operational performer who has been promoted to a managerial position because of his or her technical expertise and performance. In a managerial role, success no longer depends on operational expertise but is instead dependent upon the manager’s ability to master managerial skills that may be completely unrelated to those technical skills which lead to success. Some argue that the very skills that make lawyers excel are those that limit their ability to effectively manage (Maister, 2006).

The rationale for examining this particular research problem is that the majority of research in this area is focused on management in the general business context rather than in the law firm environment, or even in other professional services firms. As individuals ascend in an organizational hierarchy, responsibilities increase and change, situations become more complex
and demanding, and those who were once perceived as high-performers often fail to live up to the challenges of their managerial positions. Managerial failure, most commonly referred to in the literature as “derailment,” is generally defined as the behaviors of individuals who have reached managerial levels within an organization and plateau, get fired, or get demoted (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). This definition of derailment is directly applicable to the population which I seek to study in the law firm context. That is, attorneys who have successfully reached the mid-level status of senior associate or junior, non-equity partner, are considered high-potential and often either plateau, get fired or demoted.

My proposed question will advance knowledge related to a specific high-value population (middle-managers in the law firm environment) and situations of import to that population (advancement and promotion) that are common to all law firms. The results of the study will ultimately prove to be a small step in the direction of improved managerial learning and development in the law firm context.

Methodology

This study was conducted using two on-line survey questionnaires based upon items from an Executive Inventory which was designed to measure a manager’s strengths and weaknesses (Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley, 1988). The framework was developed from qualitative studies involving over 400 executives across a number of companies which generated data on the skills, attitudes, and values successful executives develop over their careers, as well as data related to derailment (Lindsey, Homes and McCall, 1987; McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988). This methodology was selected because it encompasses managerial success and failure, the topics of focus in my question, and because of its demonstrated reliability and validity.

The participants in the study include current senior partners and members of senior management at law firms, as these individuals typically make the promotion decisions for middle-managers in law firms. These individuals are in the best position to observe those high-performing mid-level attorneys that are the focus of the study, they have access to current promotion criteria and they have personal knowledge of their own individual promotion processes (and derailment) to draw upon. The survey instruments solicited perceptions regarding the competencies of attorney managers to better understand their success and failure.

Each survey had 39 identical questions total. Responses to 37 of the questions were made on the following scale: 5 = among the best I have seen; 4 = better than most I have seen; 3 = like most others I have seen; 2 = worse than most I have seen; and 1 = among the worse I have seen. At the
end of each survey, there were two open-ended questions related to managerial success and failure. Each survey was disseminated to two separate sets of 100 potential subjects. The first survey asked the subjects to consider one junior partner or senior associate in each subject’s law firm who derailed and did not become a senior partner, and respond to questions rating competency. The second survey asked subjects to consider one junior partner or senior associate in each subject’s law firm who succeeded and was promoted to senior partner, and respond to questions rating competency. The responses to the initial distribution of the surveys were insufficient, so personal contacts were asked to forward the surveys to qualified potential participants. Of the 42 responses, data from 17 who completed the derailment survey and 14 who completed the success survey qualified for analysis. The remainder of the survey responses (11) did not qualify for analysis because the potential subjects responded to 50% or less of the survey questions.

Analysis and Results

Reliability of the Study

For the purposes of this study, the specific factors created from variables in the Executive Inventory include the individual’s ability in: (i) handling legal and business complexity; (ii) directing, motivating and developing subordinates; (iii) integrity; (iv) composure; and (v) interpersonal skills. As a first step, I ran a reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha of each of these five factors. Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group, and provides an estimate of the reliability for a given test. My rationale for running this test was to examine the reliability of the factors I used to examine managerial strengths and weaknesses in my study.

After running Cronbach's Alpha on all five factors, I discovered that for four of the five factors, the alpha coefficient was above .70 (i.e., handling legal and business complexity (.961); directing, motivating and developing subordinates (.947); integrity (.919); and interpersonal skills (.822)). This suggests that the variables within each of these four factors have relatively high internal consistency (i.e., four of the five factors are reliable). A reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered "acceptable" in most social science research situations, and the higher the Alpha is, generally, the more reliable the test is considered to be. For the composure factor, however, the reliability coefficient was below .70, at .673. This may mean that the test of this variable measures
several latent attributes/dimensions rather than one, thus the Cronbach Alpha is deflated. There are only two questions that make up this factor, thus I cannot drop an item that is impacting consistency. Given how close the reliability coefficient for this factor is to the standard for acceptable alpha coefficients (.70), there is sufficient reason to continue including this in the analysis.

Significance of the Study

Given that my study seeks to understand the key managerial success and derailment themes of mid-level managers in the law firm context, I wanted to examine the difference in responses between the subjects who considered derailleurs and the subjects who considered successors in answering questions regarding managerial skills. Thus, my second step was to run t-tests on each of the five factors comparing the data from the two surveys to evaluate the differences in means between two groups. T-tests can be used even if the sample sizes are very small (e.g., as small as 10), which seemed ideal for my relatively small data sets (17 respondents completed the derailment survey and 14 respondents completed the success survey). Though these results do not directly answer my research question (i.e., they do not isolate key managerial themes in derailment or success in the law firm context), they do provide data related to my first and second hypotheses.

First, in examining the mean scores generated for the perceived managerial skills of successors and derailleurs, there appears to be a clear difference between the perceived quality of the managerial skills of successors and derailleurs. That is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the mean scores of the successors were on average higher than the mean scores of the derailleurs. This also goes to my second hypothesis, that the perceived quality of the managerial skills of successors exceeds those of the derailleurs. While the mean scores may not directly prove this hypothesis, they do provide some evidence that the quality of managerial skills of successors is perceived to be higher than that of the derailleurs. Despite the information supporting the hypotheses, statistically significant results were limited.

Statistically Significant Results: The t-test for directing, motivating and developing subordinates reflects that subjects perceived that successful mid-level managers handled directing, motivating and developing subordinates better (M=3.70, SE = .26) than derailed mid-level managers (M=3.04, SE=.09). This difference was significant (t(16.23) = -2.319, p = .002, <.05). Insignificant
Results: No significant differences were found between the two groups for the following factors (i.e., p scores > .05): 1) handling legal and business complexity (t(29) = -5.447, p=.878); 2) integrity (t(29) = -1.752, p=.793); 3) composure (t(29) = -3.367, p=.566); and 4) interpersonal skills (t(28) = -2.443, p=.249).

Correlation of the Factors Used in the Study

My third step was to examine whether there were any correlations between the five key factors utilized in my surveys. More specifically, I wanted to examine whether high or low perceived abilities in one area of managerial skills might be related to high or low scores in another area. I ran bivariate correlations to examine the correlation between the factors. As demonstrated to the left, the results of the correlation testing reveal that there are medium to large positive correlation coefficients amongst the 5 managerial skills factors (i.e., r = between .494 and .659), excluding the relationship of interpersonal skills to integrity (i.e., r = .214).

While these results do not isolate key managerial themes in derailment or success in the law firm context, they do appear to provide support for my third hypothesis, that managerial skills in the law firm context are related to one another.

Digging Deeper

My final step was to analyze the responses received to the two open-ended qualitative questions included in each survey:
in your experience, what are the key characteristics of junior partners or senior associates in law firms who "derail" or fail to become senior partners in law firms (i.e., law firm "owners")? and

in your experience, what are the key characteristics of junior partners or senior associates in law firms who succeed and become senior partners in law firms (i.e., law firm "owners")?

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the resulting qualitative data. Several key relevant themes emerged. The emerging themes go directly to answering my research question by isolating key managerial success and derailment themes for mid-level managers in the law firm context.

The top three characteristics that emerged with successors include: client service, ability to generate business and taking ownership.

A focus on providing client-service was described as “Excellent client service, to the point where the client looks to the junior partner directly on important issues . . .” and “taking ownership” was described as “those who [view] are personally heavily invested in the firm’s business and its future and show dedication to its advancement in ways that go beyond getting the work done well”. The ability to generate business was described as “ability to develop new business” or “having their own book of business.”

A lack of the following top three characteristics emerged with derailers, including: thinking strategically, ability to generate business and taking ownership.

Thus, an interesting consistency emerged in the analysis of the characteristics of derailers. Two of the key derailment themes overlapped with successor themes: taking ownership and ability to generate business. A lack of strategic thinking was described as “someone who may be technically a good lawyer, but does not get the big picture or understand how their role fits in with the clients business” and “they do not think beyond the projects on their plate.” Derailers who fail to take ownership “Do not exhibit ‘fire in the belly’, a real desire to be partner, a willingness to take charge of a client and build a good team behind him or her.” Lack of business or ability to develop business was described as “Failed to develop business or be a key person for a big client” or “having to rely on others for business.”
Limitations

The sample size for this study is a limitation (17 subjects responded to the derailment survey; 14 subjects responded to the successor survey). A larger sample size would have produced more fulsome data for analysis. Further, the nature of the data gathered is limiting. Subjects provided their own perceptions after the fact, which are basically second-hand reports of observations of conduct that occurred much earlier than the surveys were taken. In many ways, the surveys may have been biased in that subjects were asked to imagine derailleurs or successors and were then walked through a series of questions related to their capabilities. Finally, in considering the wording of the open-ended questions at the end of the survey, these questions are not framed to request key managerial traits. Instead they are framed simply to solicit data regarding general “key characteristics” of those who succeed or fail. While the subjects may have been influenced to answer the questions regarding managerial skills, there is no way to know this.

Interpretations and Recommendations

Several items of note arose in interpreting the data produced in the study. First, in running the t-tests each comparison of the mean of the factors reflected a distinct difference. More specifically, the overall perceptions of subjects responding to questions regarding successors was more positive regarding managerial skills than the perceptions of subjects responding to questions regarding derailleurs. This data suggests that successors either have a natural aptitude for managerial skills, they have received better training in managerial skills, or the subjects had biased positive perceptions of the skills of the successors. Only one of these differences was statistically significant – the difference for directing, motivating and developing subordinates. This result may have been the result of the small sample size. Alternatively, this could mean there is something unique to the managerial skill of directing, motivating and developing others with successors. Regardless, one implication of this for other practitioners is that larger sample sizes can lead to better, more substantive results.

The data further suggests that managerial skills are not only relevant in the law firm context, but that they are in some way related to success of mid-level managers in getting to the next level. In the law firm context, the ability to cite to managerial skills as a potential precursor to success
adds to the validity of the need for managerial training. The implication for other practitioners in learning and development in law firms is that there is some evidence of the benefit of managerial skill development.

Managerial skills literature, which contains little study focused on the law firm context, indicates that focusing in on derailed individuals “may inform and suggest additional measures of success” (Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988, p. 213). The results of this study reflect that the qualitative data regarding both derailed and successors revealed potential additional measures of success in the law firm context. Specifically, “taking ownership,” developing business, thinking strategically and client-service were revealed as key themes and measures to potentially be mindful of going forward.

Additional study is needed in this area. Potential next steps include creating studies that more thoroughly investigate the relevance of managerial skills in the law firm context, as well as to identify true key managerial skills. A better way to determine predictive factors may be to conduct a longitudinal study of incoming lawyers at law firms in which the incoming lawyers are the study subjects, they answer questions related to the managerial factors and get assessed against the factors, and then over time examine whether they made partner or were asked to leave. In addition, a more qualitative approach utilizing interviews or more open-ended questions regarding managerial skills may have enhanced the results regarding the key managerial themes. Finally, examining the performance evaluations of derailed and successors over a period of time may prove more useful. While this would not be contemporaneous to events, presumably the evaluations themselves would occur close to the time of the performance and would provide more comprehensive information.

Article Information

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References


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