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ABSTRACT

Of Names and their (Mis)use: Name Dropping as a Tactic of Deceptive Influence at the Workplace

This study attempts to explicate the practice of name dropping at the workplace. Name dropping is defined as the superficial invoking of influential names by organizational actors. Our study reveals that the behaviour is undertaken with an ulterior motive of influencing others (targets) to comply with workplace demands/requests. We build our theoretical arguments drawing on popular anecdotes of namedropping accounts from secondary literature (practitioner journals and popular press), our review of the (limited) academic literature on the topic and insights gathered from semi structured interviews conducted with organizational participants from diverse industries. Our study identifies name dropping as a form of *deceptive* influence, those that are adopted by managers to advance specific task objectives with targets (proactive influence tactics).

Our enquiry was premised on the broad research question: when do individuals *drop* the 'names' of influential others at the workplace? Additionally, we also sought to identify potential organizational settings that acted as facilitating conditions for the adoption of the behaviour.

Given the limited academic enquiry on the topic, we adopted a qualitative approach of collecting data about the phenomenon using semi structured interviews with participants. Our sample primarily comprised middle managers from diverse industries including banking, IT & ITES, retail sales, telecommunications, automobiles etc., among others. Middle managers, owing to their proximity with the senior levels of management on issues of strategic importance, and their sustained interactions with the operating (lower) level managers for accomplishing specific task objectives, act as the conduits of information between these otherwise disconnected levels of managerial hierarchies. Their 'bridging' position in the hierarchical network was found to facilitate the use of deceptive influence, in the form of name dropping, for accomplishing task objectives that required the coordination of members at a lateral or lower level in the hierarchy. The study observes that name dropping was adopted by actors (middle managers) under diverse individual and situational exigencies, including minimizing the social costs of displaying assertiveness, for enforcing requests/issues with target(s) and for economizing their interactions with them when stymied by time and resource constraints. We also notice that name dropping was facilitated by the existence of an information asymmetry between the middle managers and their targets (about the influence information communicated) and in some cases, by the top management support for the expedient use of names.

The study contributes to the extant literature on Proactive Influence Tactics (PITs) by theorizing name dropping as a deceptive tactic of proactive influence and empirically examining it in the context of workplace influence attempts. The extant literature on PITs has identified eleven tactics of influence through inductive enquiries; however, the role of deceptive influence in aiding managers to accomplish task objectives has been overlooked in this literature. We bridge this gap by examining name dropping in the context of PITs and demonstrating how deception is employed by managers in advancing task objectives with their

targets. Our study also adds to the managerial awareness on workplace influence attempts by suggesting the expedient use of names as a possible means by which managers can advance their task requests/demands with others. Given that most managers are adept learners of influence strategies once they are explained to them, we seek to expand the managerial mental models on workplace influence attempts by explicating deceptive influence, in the form of name dropping, as a managerial influence tactic.