

The Pecking Order

How can you increase your status? ● A clearly defined role and a central position in the group's communication network are essential

● Good verbal skills and positive body language can help you make the right impression.

ONCE YOU JOIN a group your actions and behavior cease to be determined by your personal whims and inclinations alone. You need to blend into the group's organizational structure, and this will probably mean taking on a role. You may be a decision-maker, an expert or a humorist, a quiet achiever or a gifted but ruthless manipulator. But whatever role you choose, you have to live up to it. If you mean to climb the ladder to a position of authority within a group, then playing your role effectively will take a lot of your time and energy. You will need to be aware at all times of exactly where you stand in the group's formal and informal hierarchies. Do they allow you to communicate with the right people? If not, can you change matters so that they do? Whether you can find and keep the niche you want to occupy

depends on how good you are at recognizing and interpreting the roles and the communication systems that hold your group together.

The power of roles

When your group elects a chairperson or your boss recruits someone to take charge of sales and marketing, these are roles that will provide a structure for the group. They are created intentionally. Even without a deliberate attempt at organization, however, your group would probably develop a role structure of its own. It needs this structure to eliminate confusion about who does what, so that there is no duplication of effort, every job gets done and the group functions efficiently.

Some roles, such as those of "leader" and "secretary-organizer," for example, are mainly administrative; their primary concern is the task to be done. Others, such as "supporter," "clown" or "go-between," deal more with the interpersonal side of the group. When you first join a group you will probably regard yourself as just another member. In the course of time, however, the range of actions you perform, together with the particular way you interact with others in the group, will determine the



role that you play in it. Once you have a role, it is likely to influence your decisions and actions more strongly than your individual inclinations do.

The American researcher Stanley Milgram illustrated how effective roles can be at stifling personal choice in his well-known studies of obedience to authority. Using groups of three people, the researcher was cast in the role of "experimenter"; his subjects were assigned the role of "teacher" or "learner." For each session of the test, the experimenter instructed the teacher to punish the learner with electric shocks whenever he made errors in a learning task. These shocks were bogus and the learner was actually a confederate of Milgram's who pretended to be in pain when the shock voltage exceeded 150 volts. However, the teachers all believed they were hurting the innocent learners. Because their role was that of "obedient follower," and the demands it made on them were so strong, when the experimenter demanded obedience, the majority complied even though what they were being asked to do was distasteful to them. Fewer than 35 percent of the teachers rebelled against their role by refusing to carry out the experimenter's instructions.

Roles and stress

Roles can be stressful in some circumstances. If your role in a group is not clearly defined, for example, you may worry because you are not certain that you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. Perhaps your position in the group is a new one and no one is quite sure how you will fit in. Alternatively, your view of your role may not be shared by the other members. You may think that because you are the newly elected committee chairperson, you have a right to control the group, whereas your colleagues believe you should be a figure-head rather than a dominating leader.

You may find yourself trying to play several roles at the same time, with the result that the activities of one conflict with those of another. If you agree to take a leading part in your company's Christmas show, you will have less time and energy to devote to your work. This may cause problems if schedules are pressing and you have to clear all outstanding business before the Christmas break. To make matters worse, your partner might complain that they hardly ever see you.

Sometimes a single role can make contradictory demands on you. People in lower-level management



■ **Formal and informal roles.**
LEFT Although the rigid hierarchy of the armed forces demands that each rank has clearly defined roles, in social

situations more informal roles may develop. In a group of friends, some people prefer to be the entertainer, while others are happy to listen and

spectate. ABOVE The role of assistant in an expensive store demands a helpful and deferent attitude to customers. To carry out a role, you may have to

modify your behavior in some way to match other people's expectations.

positions have in many cases been promoted from the work force, so they think of themselves as workers with more leadership responsibility. As managers, however, they must also make decisions about salaries and promotions and even help identify people who should be fired. When the conflict of loyalties becomes too great, a worker-manager may escape the tension either by returning to their old role or leaving the company altogether.

Dealing with role stress

■ Three main aspects of your role in the group can cause you stress. Perhaps it is ambiguous or ill-defined. You may have to fill different roles at the same time and find that they clash with each other. Or, again, your role may require you to do things that go against your inclinations. Whatever the problem, the consequences are potentially serious both for you and the group. Researchers looking at the effects of role stress examined 42 studies of a variety of groups. They found that it reduced people's involvement in their work, stopped them participating in decision-making and generally reduced their sense of satisfaction. Ultimately, it increased their desire to leave the group altogether.

Are there ways of dealing with role stress before your situation becomes so bad that you opt for this final drastic solution? Suppose you join a company as a secretary, then win promotion to a post that seems to put you in charge of information and publicity. When your boss continues to ask you to type letters and make telephone calls you understandably resent it. What you need to do is to take steps to clarify the requirements of your new job. If the job description does not include a secretarial element, refuse to do that kind of work. If there is no job description, then write one yourself and get it approved.

Perhaps you are in a role-conflict situation. You may

enjoy keeping the company accounts in order but your boss also makes you take inventory of stock in the warehouse. While you are doing this, your bookkeeping gets hopelessly behind. The answer here is to isolate the two roles in terms of time and place. Perhaps you can do the accounts in the morning and the stocktaking in the afternoon or allocate them different days of the week. Give each role the correct proportion of your time in relation to the other and keep firmly to this timetable. As far as place is concerned, you must not allow any people with accounting queries to disturb you in the warehouse, nor others with stock queries to interrupt while you are doing the accounts.

The duties of a new role may cause you to agonize and battle with your conscience. When you worked on the assembly line you had many friends, but now that you are foreman they all seem to have abandoned you, knowing that you have power to make life difficult for them. As foreman, your role demands that you make management decisions and put the company's interests first in the workplace, but this need not stop you meeting your friends outside work. Try to separate your roles. Be a manager at work and a friend at other times, and do not let one role dominate the other. When a conflict does arise, give priority to the more important role.

Achieving status

Besides defining who does what, roles show who has the power to do what. Authority structures, like role patterns, can either develop spontaneously in a group or be imposed on it. Most of us like to believe in equal treatment for all, but research shows that within minutes a group of strangers develops a pecking order. Certain people begin to dominate and influence others, who happily accept a more subordinate position. In time, those who emerge at the top of the group hierarchy acquire the authority to coordinate the activities of its members, relay communications among them and offer guidance on procedure. It is this authority that confers status within a group. If you are in a position to control the distribution of rewards or punishments the group receives, or you have some special skill that the group needs, you can draw on this to achieve status in your group (see *Ch 6*). Even being liked and respected for the way you work gives you authority. If you are promoted, your appointment will be a popular one and you will enjoy the support of your colleagues. Rank-and-file members have no power bases to draw on for status, so although they form the majority of the group, they remain at the bottom of its chain of command.

The people we allow to achieve status in a group are the ones who show signs of contributing most to its goals. Intuitively, we each size up our fellow members to find out who qualifies for a place at the top of the hierarchy. If you are playing a sport, you may listen more to



▲ **Who has most authority?**
Status and decision-making power often come with the job. Nevertheless, making your presence felt at meetings, contributing as much as you can to help your group achieve its goals and winning the liking and respect of colleagues, are effective ways of increasing your status.

► **Finding your way as part of an orienteering team** requires a different set of skills to writing an essay or mastering a foreign language. A child who plays a minor role in class may be a key team member in outdoor activities, and vice versa. Your role and your status within a group often depend on the skills you have to offer.

the person who has the most ability and experience in the game. At a party, the person who is most outgoing and entertaining is the one who becomes the center of attention.

Subtle status symbols

Qualities that have little relevance to the aims of a group can also influence the position you hold within it. Height, sex, age, race, occupation and family background can all add to or detract from your status.

Australian researchers have shown how an accent can affect a person's position within a group. The very large Greek community living mainly in and around Melbourne tends to be regarded as inferior by some Australians. In the study, groups of women college students working on problems that required no special expertise to complete reacted very differently to a confederate of the researchers, depending on the way she spoke. In groups where she used a Greek-Australian accent, she gained little attention, while in others an Anglo-Australian accent ensured that her position was immediately influential. Studies in the United States have yielded similar results. Juries often disregard the opinions of younger members, women, minorities and people from working-class backgrounds even when these are very relevant to the verdict.

Keeping abreast of events

In all groups and organizations, information flows along relatively fixed channels or networks. At work, perhaps, there are certain people who have the power to pass on or withhold news of the latest developments. In your neighborhood there may be a few people who seem to know everything about anything.

Businesses generally adopt a hierarchical communication network – you pass information down to your subordinates, up to your superiors and share it with your equals. The system is probably centralized, with only one or two people at the center of communications. In a trucking company, for example, the dispatcher may be the only person who knows where the day's pick-ups and deliveries are, the routes of the trucks and each driver's workload. An aircraft pilot receives information from the ground controller, co-pilot, flight attendants and navigator to help him make his decisions. Juries, government think tanks and brainstorming groups, on the other hand, have a decentralized communication network: people in all positions send and receive approximately the same number of messages.

Studies of communication networks date back to the 1950s and show that a centralized system is generally more efficient as long as the flow of information does not become too great for the person at the center to handle.



Where there is a large number of incoming and outgoing messages, a decentralized system works best.

Whichever pattern operates in your workplace, there is probably an informal communication network as well. A secretary who is very outgoing is likely to know more about the inner workings of the firm than its coldly aloof vice president. Two young executives who play racquetball together may be better informed, too, as they may trade gossip about their respective departments. If you are popular in your group, you will generally be on the receiving end of more messages than if you are not.

Status and communication

Overall, people in groups with decentralized communication networks express greater satisfaction than members of groups with centralized networks. If you work for a firm that has a centralized, hierarchical network, you should keep as close to an information "crossroad" as possible. Studies show that people in these central positions are more satisfied with the group structure and their role in it. They can communicate with high-ranking employees, influence decisions and pass information downward through the hierarchy.



The best way to communicate

■ Centralized and decentralized communication networks both have their uses, for each one has advantages over the other. Centralized networks are efficient, particularly when the group must handle tremendous amounts of information. Imagine the chaos at meetings, press conferences or group discussions if information could not be channeled through one person. When the flow of information is slow, however, the group should consider using a more decentralized network. People are more satisfied when they can communicate with anyone and everyone in the group. Also, since no one has control over information, the chances of power struggles or gatekeeping (where one person filters incoming and outgoing information) are less in decentralized groups. Friends at a sporting event, a family or a cohesive work group would be likely to benefit from decentralizing their communication systems.

◀ **A word in your ear.** *The ability to pass on information to others can enhance your status in a group, as well as boosting your self-esteem.*

Those who are at the edges of this network, however, can only communicate easily with others who are low on the company totem pole and they often feel helplessly cut off from the central flow of information.

One major disadvantage of this kind of system is that information flows sideways (to people nearby or to equals) and downward (to subordinates) with little difficulty. Passing messages upward to superiors is, however, another matter. In general, the information flowing down is positive and constructive, while that flowing up is often negative. Suggestions for improving performance, explanations of changes and feedback on results come down. Grievances about the firm's policies, insinuations about a colleague's performance and

requests for clarification of procedure go up. These tendencies mean that if you are at the edge of the network and you want to send a positive piece of information up the line (perhaps you may have just found a solution to a long-standing problem) you may have difficulty communicating it to your superiors. Because of the generally negative nature of upward communications, people are reluctant to send them so they also tend to be fewer in number, briefer and more guarded than downward ones. So, if you want to draw the management's attention to a problem, news of the problem will travel very slowly through the network, and the management may in fact be the last to hear of it. **DF**



▲ **Staying at the hub of events** is easy for these soldiers taking part in a simulated warfare exercise. In most groups it pays to be as near to the center of communications as possible. If you regularly miss out on information, you are likely to feel isolated and dissatisfied.



◀ **Small talk or information swapping?** Talking to colleagues is one way of keeping up-to-date with events in your firm. Someone who works in a different department or has a more outgoing personality than you may have information sources that you lack.

The rocky road to the top

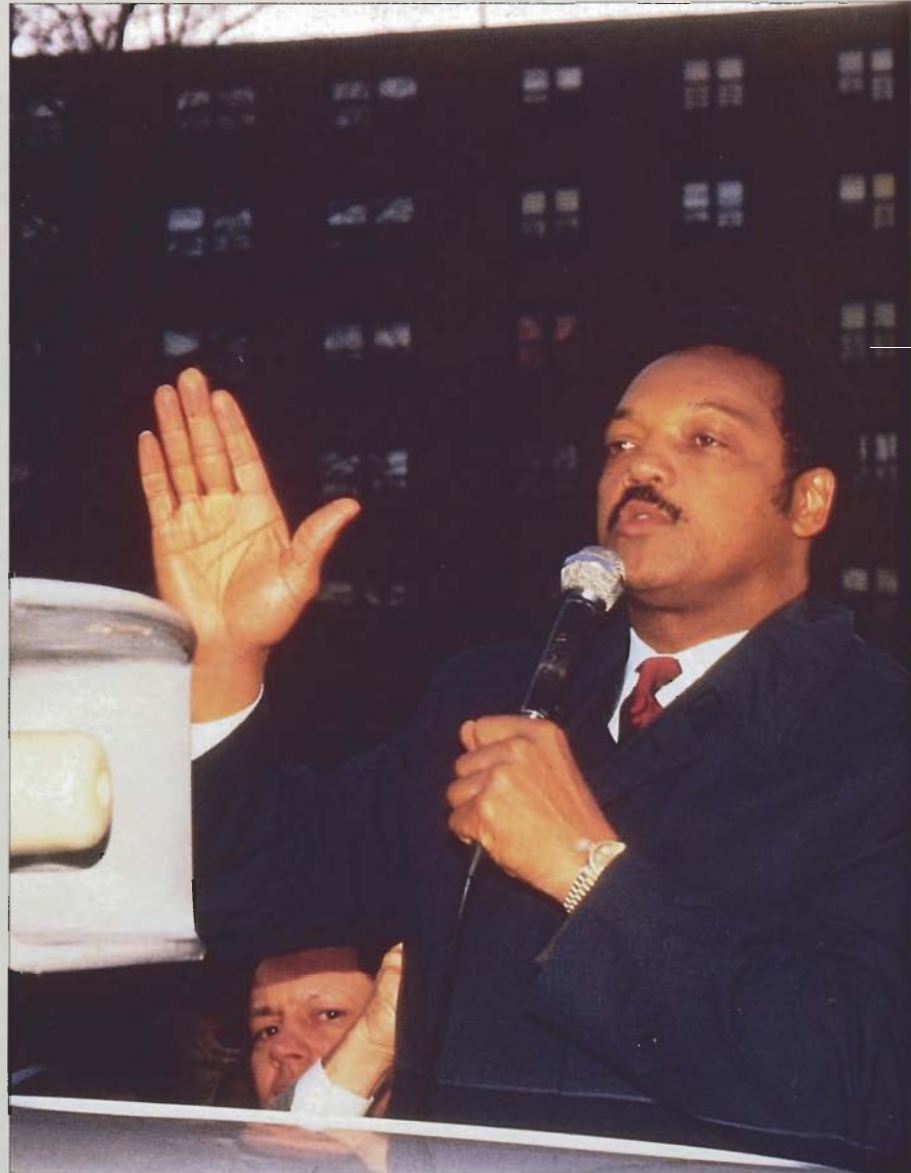
■ Dedication and being good at what you do are unfortunately not usually enough to guarantee you a prestigious position in your group. If you are determined to succeed, you need to enhance your status in other ways. You will not be the only one who is trying to do this, so how can you keep a step ahead of the other contenders?

Strategies for success

Groups often define their roles over a period of time and then, as often as not, renegotiate them. This means that one useful way of acquiring status is to expand the boundaries of your role. If you joined your firm originally as an administrative assistant and much of your work is secretarial, try transforming your role. Perhaps you could take a short course of study to gain a special skill, or to familiarize yourself with a certain area of the firm's activity. Many well-known businessmen started their career as office boys.

You should also review your position in the group's communication network. If you are only on the fringe, you will find it difficult to enhance your status. Where you should be is at the center of the group's information exchange patterns, because others will then come to you for leadership and guidance. Research shows that quantity of communication counts — if you talk a lot you are likely to impress people. The quality of the information you have to impart does not matter too much. As long as you communicate frequently with other group members you will maintain your central, status-enhancing position.

Most of us associate status with such personal characteristics as height, age, gender and educational background. Although you cannot alter these aspects of yourself, one status-indicator that you can cultivate is the way you communicate with other group members. Your aim is to project an image of confidence, authority and wisdom, and there are several means of doing this. First, instead of asking what should be done, try telling other people what to do. Interpret, confirm and dispute the views of group members but keep your own feelings or worries to



yourself. After a discussion at a meeting, summarize and draw conclusions from what was said rather than asking questions which only reveal gaps in your knowledge.

Getting your message across

You should take as much care with the verbal tactics you use to influence others as you do with your image-building program. Certain nonrational tactics betray weakness in the user, so avoid manipulation, evasion, ingratiation and pleading. If you aspire to power, you should demand, confront, persist and

▲ **A confident image is vital** if you aspire to a position of power in your group. Ways of signaling your assurance and capability include talking a lot and expressing yourself clearly, dressing in a style that is appropriate for the situation and avoiding body language that reveals hesitation or uncertainty. You are unlikely to inspire confidence in others if you seem to lack confidence in yourself.



▲ Choosing the right seat.

When you go to a meeting, do you make for the front row or the place at the head of the table? Perhaps you like to keep at the back to escape notice or sit next to a friend because it is comforting. The seat you choose can make a particular impression on the group. Generally, people regard those who sit in prominent places as having more status. If you are trying to assert your authority in order to gain status, here are two useful tips.

Try sitting in the place that allows you to make eye contact with the most group members. This choice will enable you to control the discussion better and have more influence on its final conclusions.

If you expect certain colleagues to disagree with you, sit beside them. Side-by-side seating reduces confrontation because your rivals will not be able to maintain eye contact with you without losing sight of the rest of the group.

even bully and threaten. Rational tactics, such as bargaining and persuasion, will do more to advance your cause and make other group members take your ideas seriously than nonrational ones, such as cultivating your personal popularity. Also, if you meet with resistance, be cautious as you shift from weaker tactics to stronger ones. People often give in when they face a rational opponent who uses strong tactics to try to influence them, but they can also react by digging in and losing their temper. Negotiating can be as strong a method of influence as bullying, and it is often more effective.

Just as animals communicate dominance by means of look and posture as much as by sound, people signal their authority in a group by a series of nonverbal cues. The way people dress is important, as most groups have implicit norms that link personal appearance and prestige. In the boardroom, for instance, a dark, well-tailored suit, an expensive watch and a conservative haircut denote power. In a small group of friends, however, the leaders may well be the ones who show the most flair in their choice of clothes and enjoy experimenting with the fashionable and outrageous.

Your gestures, posture, facial expression, look and touch all say something about your status in a group, too. Large, sweeping movements of your hands and

head and a relaxed but controlled stance show that you enjoy a privileged position. An attentive but unsmiling expression, a direct way of looking at people and a firm handshake reinforce the impression. When you speak, especially in front of a group, you must pitch your voice so that everyone can hear you clearly and express your ideas lucidly, avoiding such signs of nervousness as giggling, stuttering or saying, "er," "um," and "uh huh." You should speak fluently but without hurrying and pause at appropriate intervals.

Are nonverbal cues important?

Research indicates that your nonverbal language and proficiency as a speaker are extremely important in helping you to assert your authority over others. In one study, three groups of men reviewed the evidence in a personal injury lawsuit to help them decide on a suitable award for the plaintiff. All of them initially favored a sum of at least \$10,000. They then watched a videotape of a man who argued that a settlement of \$2,000 was quite sufficient. For the first group, the man displayed a number of status cues. He wore a tie and sportscoat and looked directly at the camera while speaking. His voice was firm and clear and he did not hesitate or stumble over words. The man the second group watched wore a sport-shirt and no tie. Although he never mumbled, he hesitated occasionally and did not look at the camera. The third group's man wore a T-shirt and seemed nervous, saying "um" and "er" and fumbling for words.

After listening to the speakers, all three groups changed their initial award. The group who watched the first speaker were sufficiently impressed to cut their settlement down by an average of \$4,273. Those watching the second speaker reduced theirs only slightly (an average of \$2,426). The third group actually increased the sum they wanted to give the plaintiff by an average of \$2,843. This suggests that your appearance and manner of speaking have an important part to play in establishing you at the top of your group's power structure. DF