

helping minority managers succeed

Ronald F. Aronson

What are the responsibilities of management in the orientation of new black managers in a primarily white organization? Is it fair to treat all new managers alike or do minority managers have added obstacles to overcome to achieve success? This article deals openly and directly with some of the special hazards that may await a newly employed black manager and the additional orientation required to help prevent failure.

Although equal opportunity is one of the great social issues of our time, relatively little study has been given to the orientation needs of newly employed black managers in predominantly white bureaucracies. What kinds of organizational support are required to assure an equal opportunity of success for black managers in a traditionally white organization? Equal treatment with the usual orientation may not be adequate or relevant for the new black manager. Based on my experience and study, I'll suggest some possible hazards and make several recommendations.

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Minority Managers' Feelings

Organizational administrators must appreciate the depth of the feelings of rejection carried by many young minority men and women who are presently managerial candidates. Feelings and attitudes are of a historical and cultural nature and aren't automatically eliminated with a college degree or

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by being employed in a managerial position. Also, organizational leaders must be acutely aware of the feelings and attitudes of white managers as new black managers are added to the organization.

How does a black manager feel as a new employee on the management team in a largely white organization? Jones, a graduate of the Harvard Business School and now a successful manager in a major company, described his experience as a new management trainee:

What this man and others failed to realize was that, being a black man in a unique position in a white company, I was extremely tense and ill at ease. Levels of sensitivity, polish, and tact which were foreign to me were now necessities of life. The world of white business presented me with an elaborate sociopolitical organization that required unfamiliar codes of behavior.¹

Age and Background Differences

Fernandez, in a study of 156 white and 116 black managers, found significant differences in age and social backgrounds of the managers. The mean age of black managers studied was 32 and of white managers 41.² The age difference was attributed to the recent increased employment rate of black managers. Fernandez also found differences in the social backgrounds of the managers as measured by the occupations of the fathers of the managers.

Although there were no great differences between the black and white fathers' educational levels, there were significant differences in their best occupations. Whereas two-thirds of the black managers' fathers were laborers skilled and unskilled; two-thirds of the white managers' fathers were professionals, managers, or business owners.³

The social, cultural "fit" of a new manager within an organization deserves attention to help the manager establish functional relationships. This element of orientation shouldn't be avoided with the new black manager.

Potential Hazards Management Concepts

Management style and motivational assumptions are influenced by the manager's concepts of mankind. For example, McGregor developed his popular Theory X-Theory Y based on opposite concepts of man. With the Theory X view, employees are assumed to require direct supervision and control. Managers following Theory Y assume employees are highly self-motivated.⁴

Accurately sensing the managerial style on a Theory X-Theory Y continuum within an organization is an important issue for any new manager. This is particularly difficult for a manager who has been brought into a firm at a high managerial

level without adequate experience in the organization to gain an understanding of the managerial pattern. Secondly, differences in cultural and social backgrounds may give the black manager and his/her close white associates inaccurate readings of observed managerial behavior patterns.

Leadership Concepts

Closely related to concepts of management styles are concepts of leadership. Tannenbaum and Schmidt developed a continuum to describe leadership behavior. They suggest that a manager's leadership behavior is influenced by three major forces: forces within the manager, within the subordinate, and within the situation.⁵ A new black manager has all of the usual pressures of establishing a leadership pattern plus the additional pressures of being a "minority" in a management role. Jones says:

My personal pride and sense of worth were driving me to succeed. Ironically, the more determined I was to succeed the more abrasive I became and the more critical my feedback became. This in turn impelled me to try even harder and to be even more uptight. As a result I was vulnerable to prejudgments of inability by my peers and superiors.⁶

Obviously misunderstandings of this type are dysfunctional in an organization if allowed to go unchecked.

Assignment Location

The location or area of assignment of a black manager within an organization may unexpectedly increase frustrations. Etzioni states the proposition that:

The effective, elite hierarchy is one in which the structure of the elites and the hierarchy of goal (or goals and means) are congruent. For example, in a factory the elites which embody the production or profit goals must, functionally speaking, be more powerful than those which represent professional or artistic values.⁷

A black manager in a profit organization may misunderstand his relatively low influence when compared to other managers of similar rank if he should be employed to supervise personnel, public relations, or other expressive functions rather than the supervision of instrumental or profit activities. The same is true in a normative organization (school, church, or political party) when a black manager is responsible for purchasing, fund raising, or budgets rather than for the primary functions of the organization. The concern here is for top management to recognize these potential inequities of

influence, at apparently equal ranks, and to help staff understand the nature of their involvement in the organization.

*Evaluation
Process*

Perhaps the most serious organizational concern of minority managers is the process of evaluation. Morgan and VanDyke interviewed 44 black managers in predominately white business establishments. In summarizing their interviews relative to promotions, Morgan and VanDyke state:

Where do I stand? All employees, white and black, want the answer but blacks probably look for it more urgently than whites because they have less tradition in white-collar jobs. What they really want is some kind of periodic appraisal or other signal that tells them where they stand.⁸

The authors go on to point out that minority-group members are less likely to ask for evaluation because experience has taught them never to expose themselves to a potential rebuff or to criticism. Yet, the need to know "how I'm doing" is constant and pressing.

Recommendations

Organizational effectiveness will be improved in the Extension Service if we're prepared for the pressures, potential problems,⁸ and unique situations that confront new black managers in predominately white organizations. The following recommendations are made to suggest some areas of consideration for the top management group of any organization.

*Know Attitudes
and Values*

Become as familiar as possible with the current feelings, attitudes, and values of all managers employed by the organization. Porter suggests:

Managers must themselves recognize that their own and their subordinates' beliefs, attitudes, motives and values are as relevant to improving organizational performance as the wide-range of technical abilities, knowledge, and skills which they fully appreciate must be acquired and used.⁹

Attitudes and values that are functional in the organization may have been dysfunctional in the new manager's prior environment. Top management must have a thorough knowledge and acceptance of these potential differences.

*Have Equal
Employment
Opportunity*

Establish an equal opportunity policy and step-by-step procedure that guarantees equal employment opportunity. While there is a need to increase opportunities for young black managers, it shouldn't be done in such a manner that the new manager is alienated from the management group by the employment process. Developing and managing equal

employment practices still looms as a major problem and responsibility. The goal of top management is to develop a purposeful employment procedure that will open new opportunities for equally qualified blacks while maintaining a sense of fair play within the management team.

**Provide
Evaluation
System**

Provide a system of performance evaluation that will tell every employee "where he stands" and will assure equal treatment concerning promotions and salary increases. "Managing by objectives" may well be a means for providing objective rather than subjective evaluation. Even with the managing-by-objectives approach, precautions must be taken to assure that a manager, and particularly a black manager, can relax in the knowledge that the objectives aren't simply imposed by higher managers. Building confidence in the system for providing promotions and salary increases is a major factor in employee satisfaction.

**Have
Sociocultural
Orientation**

Include the social and cultural aspects of the position as well as any technical instruction required during in-service orientation for new managers. The social and cultural orientation may be done in part in a group setting. However, this orientation is primarily a matter of having someone available to interpret situations and to provide background as needed in a close and confidential manner.

**Provide
Organizational
Orientation**

Provide a thorough orientation describing the structure, purpose, and roles within the bureaucratic structure of Extension. Clarify the significance of each position and the relationship of positions to one another. This will help to eliminate the buildup of role expectancies that can't be met. Include orientation on leadership and supervisory styles that are encouraged within Extension. Training in these areas should be conducted on a continuing basis as a new manager has need for more and more complex information as he becomes more familiar with the total Extension Service.

Summary

The Reverend Jesse Jackson in messages to high school students from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., says:

It's not enough to be young, gifted and black, if you don't face up to it, you renege on all the hard-won promises of the civil rights struggles of the 60's, promises of everything that Martin and Malcolm (and Jesse) and thousands of others marched, sat in, and fought for from Bogalusa to Boston.¹⁰

Jackson admonishes black students to strive for excellence in their school work and to adhere to acceptable standards

of dress, behavior, and language. He calls on parents and teachers to expect and demand excellence.

Perhaps the most demeaning form of prejudice is to expect less than excellence from a new black manager who is well trained for the position and has the support and orientation needed to succeed.

Footnotes

1. Edward W. Jones, "What It's Like to Be a Black Manager," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. LI (July-August, 1973), 113.
2. John P. Fernandez, *Black Managers in White Corporations* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), p. 10.
3. *Ibid*, p. 12.
4. Douglas McGregor, *Leadership and Motivation* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1966), p. 5.
5. Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt, "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern," in *Current Perspectives for Managing Organizations*, Bernard M. Bass and Samuel D. Deep, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970).
6. Jones, "What It's Like to Be a Black Manager," p. 114.
7. Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), p. 52.
8. John S. Morgan and Richard L. VanDyke, *White-Collar Blacks: A Breakthrough?* (New York: American Management Association, Inc., 1970), pp. 133-34.
9. Hollis W. Porter, "Management Training for Cross-Cultural Application," in *Current Perspectives for Managing Organizations*, Bernard M. Bass and Samuel D. Deep, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 583.
10. "Black Is Dutiful," *The National Observer*, May 8, 1976, p. 1.