

Why Managers Have Trouble Empowering: A Theoretical Perspective Based on Concepts of Adult Development

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Introduction

Managers are being called upon to empower their subordinates. This is true from first-line supervisors to CEOs. An article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Fuchsberg, 1993) points out that this is part of a broader movement in corporate organizations to spread decision-making authority and grant greater responsibility and autonomy to subordinates. In my experience working with high-level, successful managers on their development (Kaplan, with Drath & Kofodimos, 1991), I have found that most managers embrace the idea of empowerment, but have a difficult time putting it into practice. For example, one high-level manager I worked with told me flatly, “I’m a participative manager. I believe in empowering people.” Yet this manager’s subordinates (who were managers themselves) gave the following descriptions of him: “[He’s] insensitive to others,” “He’s not a good listener to the ideas of subordinates,” “He’s so focused on what he wants,” “He gives direction all the time.” This was not simply a case of a manager being less than candid with me. Referring to the manager’s insensitivity, one subordinate told me, “He knows he’s like this, and he consciously tries to compensate for it,” but that somehow he could not do this. “Since he feels passionate about [his] direction, he feels comfortable pushing his points even though he may be adversarial in doing so.”

I have seen this pattern often: Managers have a sincere commitment to be participative and empower their subordinates, yet cannot follow through on their commitment. I suspect that many people in organizations have also seen this pattern. Why should this happen? How is it that sincere, effective people who understand the need for sharing authority would have so much trouble doing it?

In this report I will suggest that the answer lies not, as some would say, in the manager’s need for power or dominance; rather it lies in the nature of a successful manager’s personal development. More generally, I will argue that the strengths and weaknesses of successful, effective managers are related to specific developmental capacities and limitations. In other words, managers are being rewarded (promoted, made successful) because of their developmental *capacities*, but these same managers cannot

escape the related developmental *limitations*—among which, I will argue, is the ability to empower subordinates. In short, many of today's managers are in a bind: They are being asked to behave toward subordinates in ways that run counter to what has made them successful. To escape this bind, managers must engage in development at the level of personal meaning, and organizations must evolve into institutions supporting such development.

This report is based on eight years of research and applications involving high-level managers in large organizations. This work, done in collaboration with Robert E. Kaplan and earlier with Joan R. Kofodimos, focused on the character of highly successful managers and their developmental prospects. We have described how high-level managers have difficulty getting, accepting, and acting on developmental feedback (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1985). We have examined the role of executive development in organization development, and found that characterological factors associated with successful managers affect the prospects for effective organization development (Kaplan, Kofodimos, & Drath, 1987). In several works, Kaplan (1989, 1990, 1991) explores the idea of an executive character type—the expansive type—that is rooted in deep-seated concerns about one's self-worth that produce exaggerated efforts to achieve mastery. Kofodimos (1990) has described our method of action research in detail.

The purpose of this report is to examine, from the viewpoint of self-construction (Fingarette, 1963; Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976; Perry, 1970), the relationship between personal development and the successful manager's ability to empower subordinates. Kaplan (1989) has looked to the pursuit of mastery in service of self-worth to explain the roots of expansive ambition and, in turn, has attributed some measure of leaders' effectiveness to their urge to "expand." Kaplan's view emphasizes the early-life origins of the drives we observed in many of the executives we studied. Kaplan has also done a superb job of showing how these origins influence executives' effectiveness and ineffectiveness. In this report I emphasize the lifelong activity of constructing meanings (Kegan, 1982) as a way of understanding certain typical managerial capacities and limitations. A theoretical groundwork for understanding successful managers in

terms of the development of personal meaning is presented. I then apply the theory to explain certain important and typical managerial capacities and limitations, drawing on my research with executives. The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of these ideas for managerial and organization development.

Systems of Personal Meaning

This report emphasizes the relationship between the structure of personal meaning and the demands of leadership. It addresses the process by which a person constructs a self and gives it meaning, the ever-shifting balance between the inner and outer worlds (the self and others) as the primary developmental movement of the self, and how the demands of leadership influence the meaning of the self and tend to fix that meaning and inhibit further development.

Personal meaning arises and develops in many ways: through religious concern, in achievement and contribution to society, through providing for and protecting family—these are just a few examples. But are there more fundamental processes of meaning? Piaget (1970) emphasized the organism's need to differentiate itself from its surrounding environment while also integrating itself with that environment. The idea that integration with and differentiation from others is a defining dimension of the structure of meaning for the human organism is central to Robert Kegan's theory of the construction and development of the self over a lifetime (1982). Because Kegan's ideas are important here, his theory is broadly described below.

Human Being as a Meaning-making Activity

A being is more than an entity (a human being); it is also a process (being human). The essential process of being human is the process of organizing meaning, making meaning. This basic concept—that the person arises in the activity of making meaning—has been addressed in neopsychoanalytic ego psychology (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1936), object relations theory (Winnicott, 1965), and the work of Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1951). Kegan is especially interested in the development (the unfolding over time) of the activity of making meaning, the process of meaning-making with its turnings and stopping places.

According to this concept, a person is in effect an activity that results in an entity, “an ever progressive motion engaged in giving itself new form” (Kegan, 1982, p. 8). The activity of composing, organizing, or making meaning occurs between an event and the person’s response to this event. The essence of personhood—of human being—is to make sense (make meaning) of oneself, the world, and one’s place in the world.

In more concrete terms, what does “meaning-making” mean? What does it mean to say that meaning-making takes place between an event and the person’s response to the event? Suppose the event is a thunderstorm. You are out for a walk and suddenly see a bright flash of light and soon hear thunder. Unless you have an uncommon fear of thunder, you do not cower or panic and run, as an animal might do. Why? Because you carry around in your head a set of assumptions about the flash of light and the sound of thunder. The storm is not some event you do not understand. The assumptions in your head allow you to interpret what you see and hear. They also allow you to predict what will happen in the near future and plan your own actions accordingly. A thunderstorm thus makes sense. You know what it is and your relationship to it. The set of assumptions that allow you to do this could be called a meaning-making structure, and your reflective response to the storm (interpretation, understanding, and planning) is human because it involves making meaning instead of just reacting or responding on instinct or fear.

Now take this example and multiply it many, many times covering nearly all the “events” in a person’s life. To nearly every event we have a meaning-making response. (When this response fails we “panic” and don’t know what to do and hide or run in fear either actually or psychologically.) The pervasiveness of the meaning-making response is what I am referring to when I say that the essence of being human is to make meaning; this process creates the entity, human being (in the same way the processes of cell division, photosynthesis, and so forth, create the entity, plant). It is the making of meaning that makes a being human.

Another important idea in this report is that meaning-making (and the mental structures that allow us to make meaning) can change and develop over time. Fingarette (1963) has described this development of meaning-making in terms of reading poetry. Suppose you have read and

memorized a poem. It is one of your favorites, because of the melodious flow of the words and the somewhat indefinable ideas it puts into your head. If pressed to explain the poem fully, you would have to admit that you cannot make all the pieces fit together. The poem does not quite make sense, but it has some powerful meaning for you anyway. Then suppose that a teacher or friend suggests an “over-all organization or unifying meaning scheme” (Fingarette, 1963, p. 21) that transforms the words of the poem. For example, you might find out that the poem “is about” something you had never before suspected. You discover that the poem still means what you ambiguously felt it meant, but it means more, as well. Suddenly you “see” the poem as if for the first time. The words make sense in an entirely new way that still contains the old way. You can still understand the poem the old way, but now from a new perspective that allows a fuller understanding as well. The “unifying meaning scheme” constitutes or constructs a new experience of the poem. So it is according to this view of human being. Our concepts and ways of organizing the world and our place in it construct (build up) our overall experience of the world, and these concepts and ways of organizing the world can change. When they do, we see the world with new eyes—almost literally with new eyes, because as the process of making meaning creates the entity, self, when the meaning changes, the very self changes.

Self and Other

The two most fundamental factors involved when we make meaning are self and other—all that is inner on the one hand and all that is outer on the other. The two most fundamental processes of making meaning are integration (movement toward inclusion, or relatedness) and differentiation (movement toward autonomy, or separation). Thus, at its most fundamental level, our meaning-making activity revolves around what we take to be self and what we take to be other, and the relationship between them. Although many of the developmental theories espoused in the last fifty years seem to favor differentiation (development toward autonomy and separateness from others) as the goal of development and devalue integration (Gilligan,

1978), Kegan (1982) emphasizes the biological, adaptive requirement of all organisms to pursue both differentiation and integration.

This requirement is at the core of Kegan's idea about the development (the changing or unfolding over time) of human constructions of meaning. In essence his idea is that the "fundamental motion in personality" is the "evolution of meaning" concerning our aloneness and our relatedness (Kegan, 1982). Although this fundamental motion is central for everyone, it is especially important for the work of managers. Perhaps no profession demands so much from a person in terms of separation and relatedness. Managers must simultaneously stand alone and belong to a team, involve others in decisions and know when to decide alone, take responsibility and share authority, and so forth. These tensions are the essence of a manager's work. They are also the tensions present when a manager confronts the idea of empowering subordinates.

Because Kegan's framework can help us understand the trouble managers have with empowerment, I will briefly summarize his model of development.

Kegan's Model of Development

According to Kegan's framework, development is a balancing act. What gets balanced is self and other. The dynamics of balance consist of creating and maintaining some kind of boundary between self and other that allows differentiation without cutting off connection, then experiencing the inevitable breakdown in this balance (because it is always a compromise), and then re-establishing a new (but still imperfect) equilibrium.

This continually reconstructed balancing act begins in infancy and continues throughout one's life. The developmental goal (the outcome assumed to be the most adaptive) of the process is achieving a degree of synthesis between differentiation and integration. In this theoretically "ideal" state of development a person would fully recognize what is self and what is other (self and other would be fully differentiated) so that self and other could relate fully (become integrated, achieve true intimacy) without fusing (without "losing" the self in others).

Every state of development involves “embeddedness.” This is in the sense of being immersed in some surrounding environment. In this case, the surrounding environment is a structure of meaning. Think again of the example of the poem. Your initial understanding of the poem constituted an embedding environment. In a very real sense, you could not rise above this way of understanding the poem. When a new meaning scheme for the poem was introduced, you were able to reflect on your old way of understanding from the perspective of the new way. In the terms of the theoretical perspective used in this report, you would be said to have emerged from embeddedness in the old way of understanding. You can now “see” the old way, whereas before you “saw with” the old way of understanding the poem. Development, then, is the process of “emerging from embeddedness” (Schachtel, 1959). At the very most fundamental level of development that Kegan is dealing with, the process of development is one of emerging from one way of constructing the relationship between self and other and gradually ending up with a new way of constructing that relationship—a new way that allows us to reflect on the old way; a new way that *contains* the old way.

To see what this means in more concrete terms, consider the infant. The infant is embedded in her reflexes of sensing and movement (for example, hunger pangs). She can only act on reflex without understanding those reflexes (she can cry out in hunger without “knowing” she is hungry). Moreover, the infant lives in a world without “objects,” a world in which everything is an extension of herself (if she is in pain, her known world is pain). The first developmental movement begins as the infant begins to recognize that some objects in the world are “not me.” This is the essence of differentiation. When objects are thus recognized, a self is created separate from these objects. When this happens, the infant’s reflexes become something she *has*, and she emerges from a state of embeddedness in which she *was* her reflexes. What was “structure” (the reflexes) has become “content” in a new structure (Piaget, 1970) of impulses and perceptions. *Having* reflexes rather than *being* reflexes means that the infant can “know” she is hungry upon feeling the contractions of her stomach; she no longer merely cries reflexively in a state of hunger.

Being embedded is the same as being subject to. When we are embedded we are subject to a certain way of understanding the world. We cannot rise above that way. The shift from being subject to (embedded in) a certain way of making meaning to being able to take that way of making meaning as an object—to *have* it rather than to *be* it—is what development is. Of course, development also creates a new embeddedness. That is, when an old way of understanding becomes something we can “have” and reflect on, rather than something we “are” and cannot reflect on, it does so within the context of a new way of understanding, and we become subject to (embedded in) this new way of understanding. This process of emerging from embeddedness only to again be embedded—albeit at a higher level of adaptation—is the key concept to understand and remember about Kegan’s scheme.

The idea of development by moving from “subject” to “object” can be more easily understood through an example. As we have said, to be subject is to “see with” rather than to “see through.” Think about so-called cultural blinders, for example. We see with our culture-bound norms and expectations, accept them as given, and cannot examine them for what they are—that is, we cannot see through them. In this case, our cultural heritage is something we are, not something we have. The culture holds us; we are embedded in it and cannot rise above it. An object, on the other hand, is something we can hold, rather than something that holds us. Subject may become object, for example, when we learn that how far away we stand from another person is largely culturally determined. Then we “know” about this distance in a way we never did before. We *see through* its cultural meaning instead of *seeing with it*. The idea of “personal space” becomes an object. In this way we achieve a more adequate way of understanding ourselves and others.

With all of this in mind—especially the idea of emerging from one state into another state of higher adaptation, and into a new state of embeddedness—briefly examine Kegan’s stages of growth presented below.¹ Readers will be rewarded by reviewing Kegan’s entire scheme, including early childhood, to gain a sense of how the stages that are important for managerial issues, especially empowerment, relate to the scheme

as a whole. Remember that “object” refers not just to things, but also to people, especially to parents, other loved ones, and friends.

1. The Incorporative Stage: No objects exist. Everything is subject. The world is an extension of the infant.

2. The Impulsive Stage: In this stage objects are recognized as separate from the self, but are subject to the person’s perception. The person is subject to (embedded in) her or his perceptions. Thus, if the person’s perception of the object changes, the object itself is understood to have changed. Hence, the balance is in favor of the inclusion of the self in the object world.

3. The Imperial Stage: The person’s perceptions and impulses become an object (something the person has, and no longer is). This means that the person gains control over perceptions and impulses, which imparts a sense of freedom, power, and independence—the birth of agency (Bakan, 1966). On the other side of the balance, the person is now embedded in her or his needs, wishes, and interests; that is, one cannot separate oneself from what one needs or wants. The person’s wants and desires *are* her or his *self*. The balance is in favor of the person’s differentiation from the object world.

4. The Interpersonal Stage: The person emerges from embeddedness in her or his needs and becomes a person who *has* needs. This means that “others” can be understood as having their own needs and constitutes a reality in which the person mediates needs of the self and needs of others in mutuality. The person is now embedded in this mutuality. One is one’s relationships. The balance is in favor of the person’s inclusion in the world of others.

5. The Institutional Stage: The person becomes someone who *has* relationships. This constitutes a reality in which “I” become a thing apart from a context of mutuality. This creates the sense of self-autonomy and “self-authorship” we call *identity*. The person is now embedded within this

identity. One *has* relationships and *is* one's identity. The balance favors the person's differentiation from other.

6. The Interindividual Stage: The person emerges from her or his identity, becomes a self who *has* an identity, and thus becomes an individual. In doing this, the person recognizes the "self systems" of others, and the interpenetration of these self systems becomes the new "culture of embeddedness." Now the person *has* an identity and *is* one among many. The balance favors the person's inclusion in the world of others.

This scheme has two important features. The first is the movement between subject/object balances, with the orientation alternating between balances favoring inclusion and balances favoring differentiation. The second is the evolution (gradual growth and improvement in adaptation) by which one comes to know what one once was embedded in and thus could not know (just as a fish only "knows" water when it is pulled from it). From embeddedness in perceptions and impulses, we come to *have* (and thus know) our perceptions and impulses, but at the same time we become embedded in our needs. Emerging from this embeddedness, we come to know our needs (and thus the needs of others) and become embedded in our mutuality (we *are* our relationships). As we come to *have* relationships (and thus know them as relationships rather than as our self), we create a unique, self-authored identity in which we are then embedded. Finally, we emerge from embeddedness in our identity, and thus *know* our identity (i.e., become persons who *have* an identity, rather than *being* our identity) and become embedded in a system of mutually relating but independent individuals.

I now address how this idea of personal meaning is related to managerial capacities and limitations, and the implication of this for managers who are being called upon to empower others, who sincerely want to do this, but who cannot, in spite of their intentions, actually do it.

Managers and the Institutional Stage

My hypothesis is that many important managerial strengths and weaknesses are related to the capacities and limits of a manager's life "stage" in the development of meaning-making with respect to the self and others. Torbert (1991) has studied the developmental level of managers for a number of years and has found that most managers are (roughly speaking) in the fifth stage described above. Typical and important managerial strengths arise from capacities created in this "institutional" stage. Also, many typical and important managerial weaknesses result from limitations of the "institutional" stage with respect to managerial tasks.

Two points need to be remembered while reading the rest of this report. The first is related to the word "stage." Because people are familiar with the word, and because in some ways it accurately represents the idea of a procession of qualitatively different and more inclusive ways of knowing, I will use the word. However, bear in mind that development is an ever-evolving process. Stages are convenient ways of referring to certain moments in this process when the person's way of making meaning is, for at least a period of time, relatively stable. Kegan (1982, p. 277) warns us in this regard: "Stages . . . are only indicators of development. To orient around the indicators of development is to risk losing the person developing."

The second point worth remembering is that we are dealing here with a theory of development involving the organization of ways of knowing self and others. Behavior cannot be directly predicted from this. A person in one stage or another cannot be predicted to behave in one way or another, or even to have feelings and attitudes in one way or another. As we will see, stages engender certain capacities and also certain limitations on *ways of knowing*. The point I will be making is that the capacities and limitations of the "institutional" stage interact with a given environment (in this case the hierarchical organization) to bring out and elaborate certain attitudes and behaviors.

Characteristics of the Institutional Stage

This stage of development is principally characterized by (1) the taking of interpersonal relationships as an object (that is, interpersonal relationships move from being something one is embedded in to something one can hold and reflect on), and (2) by the creation of a distinct, autonomous identity, which becomes the embedding environment of this meaning structure. A closer look at these two main features of the institutional stage will help us better understand how the manager's ability to empower might be affected by the capacities and limitations of this way of understanding self and others.

Interpersonal relationships, which one was subject to (imbedded in) in the preceding "interpersonal" stage, become externalized and objectified in the institutional stage. This main shift in—or reconstruction of—meaning comes about in ceasing to "see with" interpersonal relationships and beginning to "see through" them, in ceasing to *be* one's relationships and beginning to *have* relationships. For the person who undergoes such a shift in meaning, the feelings connected to interpersonal relations now lose their power to shape—that is, to reflect—the self, and instead are reflected on by that self (Kegan, 1982).

For example, in the interpersonal stage a person can feel shame or embarrassment concerning personal appearance. But more important, the shame is immediate, leading directly to a desire to change whatever is causing the shame (perhaps abandoning an unfashionable style of dress or changing a hairstyle). When one shifts in meaning to the institutional stage, however, personal appearance becomes part of an autonomous identity. In this stage the feelings caused by opinions and comments of others—even strong feelings of embarrassment—are mediated by one's identity. The person in the institutional stage considers such factors as the person who made the remark, the situation, and the importance of the comment in the context of other factors. In short, interpersonal relations become something the person has as an object, and thus something one can reflect on to make choices and judgments.

The second main feature of the institutional stage is the creation of a distinct identity. The reconstitution of the meaning of relationships from

subject to object allows a person to maintain a coherence with respect to self in the interpersonal arena, and thus allows the creation of this identity (Kegan, 1982). One can separate the self from the context of the interpersonal and become one's "own person." This creates an independence never before experienced. As shown above, it creates a self who can have relationships with others. It also brings into being an identity that takes over the function of self-regulation previously accomplished through direct reference to the needs and standards of others such as parents, other authority figures, and peers. In this stage, the identity becomes a "psychic institution" that sets up an internal "government" of self-regulation (Kegan, 1982). Self now has a new meaning. In the earlier interpersonal stage, the self was a reflection of the interpersonal realm; self was, in effect, created and defined in relationship to others. Now "self" is "identity," an autonomous, self-possessed, self-regulating structure that maintains itself and guards its boundaries in the interpersonal domain.

For an example of this change in meaning, consider people who become less concerned with doing work to please others and become more concerned with doing work that pleases themselves. Instead of living up to the expectations and standards of others, as is likely in the interpersonal stage, the person develops internal standards and imposes expectations on the self that the self tries to meet.

The Institutional Stage and Managerial Strengths and Weaknesses

Many typical managerial strengths and weaknesses can be seen in terms of a manager's way of making meaning with regard to self and others. In this view, some (although certainly not all) important and typical managerial strengths are related to the capacities engendered by the institutional meaning system (or stage of development), and some weaknesses are related to the limits of that system. Furthermore, effective managers have achieved many of their strengths by developing especially well the capacities of the institutional stage. Such effective managers, however, also have built-in, concomitant weaknesses related to the limits of the institutional

stage. Remember that the specific behaviors I will be discussing are not products of the institutional stage alone; rather they are co-produced by the stage of development of managers and the particular demands of the environment in which they function. The institutional stage and the hierarchical organization operating together constitute the attitudes and behaviors I will be describing.

By allowing a person to take interpersonal relationships as an object and thus create a distinct identity, the institutional stage engenders the capacity for autonomy. In metaphorical terms, the self is created as an independent government (Kegan, 1982). This government has its own internal system of rules and regulations, its own laws and norms. Other governments (that is, other people) can influence this government or its system of governance only in ways mediated or approved of by the government itself. The government relates to others as an autonomous nation relates to other nations: through agreements and contracts that, although they may function to the mutual benefit of both parties, also function to maintain autonomy and relative independence for the identity, the self.

This analogy illustrates the following two primary capacities and related limitations of the institutional stage from which managerial strengths and weaknesses arise: the capacity for relationships with others, in which the emotions arising from the interpersonal realm are mediated by the self, and the related limit imposed by a difficulty with intimacy; and the capacity of the separate, autonomous identity for internal maintenance and self-regulation, and the related limit imposed by the intimacy of the autonomous identity. These related pairs of capacities and limits, and the managerial strengths and weaknesses that I suggest develop from them, are examined below.

The objectification of feelings in the interpersonal domain enables managers to form effective working relationships. Gaborro (1979, 1987) has argued that, although intimacy and self-disclosure are important in personal relationships, they may have a negative effect on working relationships. Managers see the need to have good communication with others, be able to discuss expectations, influence one another, and develop trust in one another's competence (Gaborro, 1979)—in short, to respect one an-

other—but they do not see a need to be close personally. A sense of detachment from others is regarded as necessary. As Maccoby (1976, p. 194) points out, “Detachment protects the manager from being too involved with others’ emotions.” In my experience, good managers are almost always described as being “personable,” “cordial,” “approachable,” and even “warm,” but never as being affectionate or intimate. The meaning structure of the institutional stage is, I suggest, an important underlying framework for the development of detached relationships based on mutual expectations and mutual respect of competence and authority.

One manager I studied was typical of managers with good working relationships. He was successful and effective in his large company, as illustrated by his having been promoted to one of the top five positions. He was widely regarded as having “the respect of all who deal with him” (all quoted material is drawn verbatim from notes made during interviews). This respect was a leading basis for his ability to “get people on board, lined up, and excited about his vision.” Moreover, such respect—which I distinguish from feelings of closeness or affection—was also the basis for this manager’s ability to forge the types of interpersonal contracts necessary in a hierarchy. Several people said that one of his primary strengths was his ability to be “tough but fair.” He was able to maintain good relationships while “really holding people accountable.” He could “give people a lot of independence,” but was “not afraid to make [personnel] changes” when people “start screwing up.” Again, the way this manager gained respect from others and forged “tough but fair” contracts is typical of managers I have known who have good working relationships. It is also a strength that arises as the institutional stage allows interpersonal relationships to be taken as an object. Being able to reflect on interpersonal relationships and make judgments about them (as opposed to being embedded in them) allows a manager to make what most people in organizations would consider as nothing more than rational decisions. The question of whether such a way of understanding interpersonal relationships can lead to “empowerment” remains open at this point.

Another prominent managerial strength arising from taking relationships as an object is toughness in decision making. Although a manager’s

“rational” approach to decisions might be explained in terms of learned skills, my experience with managers suggests that something much more fundamental is at work. For example, one manager answered a question about how well he thought he was able to empathize with others by saying, “Pretty good. I can feel for people. In terms of letting that override a decision, I don’t empathize at all.” For most managers I have studied closely, objectivity in decision making depended on their ability to reflect on and make judgments about their interpersonal feelings—to not be swept along by their feelings for others—when making decisions. Thus, the institutional meaning structure, with its emphasis on an autonomous, self-regulating identity who forges virtually “contractual” relationships with others, may be an important framework for “objectivity” and “rational analysis.”

But with this capacity comes a built-in limitation. These are the weaknesses no manager in the institutional stage—no matter how effective otherwise—can avoid without further evolution in her or his structure of meaning.

Return to the metaphor of the institutional stage as a government. As noted, this government relates to other governments (other people) through mutual expectations (not unlike treaties and accords) and mutual respect (“You respect my independence and I’ll respect yours”). This puts the government at some distance from others and allows it to reflect on its relations, that is, to make choices and judgments about those relations. It does not, however, make fertile ground for intimacy. The feelings arising in relations influenced by the institutional structure of meaning are mediated, whereas the feelings arising in intimacy are immediate. The institutional self-government must defend itself against intimacy, for unmediated (immediate) feelings endanger the government by threatening to influence it directly and thus break down its independent, autonomous self-regulation.

This metaphor illustrates the problem that immediate emotion—especially feelings of intimacy, passion, rage, and grief—poses for the manager in the institutional stage. In terms of strengths, the capacity to hold interpersonal relationships as object is what equips the manager so well for working relationships (relationships based on mutual respect and performance of duty), but when circumstances force those relationships to

enter a more personal or intimate sphere (when they become intense and are no longer mediated by the task), the limits of the stage are encountered.

Relationships in the organization may be forced to enter this more intimate sphere in response to conflict. The managers I have studied consistently scored low on the Benchmarks® feedback instrument (Lombardo & McCauley, 1990) in the area of “confronting others skillfully” or “dealing with problem employees.” When interpersonal feelings have become more personal and less task-based, these managers have tended either to run away from conflict or to deal with it aggressively. In terms of the government metaphor, such managers tend to become either isolationist or combative because they have scant, if any, “international” (that is, person-to-person) means of working constructively through intense, immediate emotion.

One successful manager I studied who had a typically isolationist response to conflict was described as “hard to read when he disagrees with you.” This same manager would “hold back” in meetings when he found himself disagreeing with others. He also had a habit of “working the back room on people; he’s not up-front or forthright.” Interestingly, this manager otherwise received high marks for his integrity and honesty; only in dealing with conflict was his directness questioned. A manager who had a typically aggressive response to conflict answered a question about how he displayed his emotions by saying, “I can lose my cool. I tend to make two or three negative displays [of emotion] for every positive one.” This manager’s subordinates described him as being “extremely argumentative,” as “not mincing words. . . . He just picks up the two-by-four and hits you with it.”

Interpersonal relations may also be forced into a more intimate sphere in response to affection and affiliation. Managers I have worked with usually score quite low in the area of “expressed affection” on the FIRO-B instrument (Schutz, 1977). This score indicates an unease with behavior in which the person attempts to be “personal and intimate” (Musselwhite, 1982). This discomfort often extends to the manager’s spouse (“My wife would like for me to be closer to her” is a typical comment), but is also in evidence in the workplace, where—as noted above—close relationships may be associated with ineffectiveness. Perhaps be-

cause of this association, a manager's inability to become close to workers is rarely mentioned as a weakness, although occasionally an informant will lament that a manager is "not open" or will wish that a manager "wouldn't hold in how he feels sometimes." Generally, however, organizations have few, if any, expectations that a good manager will be close to her or his co-workers.

If interpersonal trust in organizations is truly based primarily on mutual respect for competence or authority, and not on mutual feelings of affiliation and affection, when competence or authority is questioned this trust may quickly break down and perhaps lead to conflict that is—as noted above—either avoided or dealt with aggressively. If this scenario occurs often in organizations, one could speculate that a capacity for intimacy is more important to working relationships than some observers have concluded (Gabarro, 1979, 1987).

In sum, the capacity to hold interpersonal relations as an object, which is so vital to a manager's ability to form good working relationships in organizations (as they are now constituted), imposes a concomitant limit on the manager's ability to be close to others. Concerning empowerment, one can ask: Is empowerment possible without interpersonal closeness? Can empowerment work in organizations in which good working relationships are instrumental relationships?

The other primary capacity of the institutional stage from which many typical managerial strengths may arise is the capacity of the autonomous identity to create an internal system of self-regulation. This capacity produces typical managerial strengths in at least three areas: focus and drive, accountability and responsibility, and the consonance of the self system with organizational systems.

Ambition and the need to pursue self-worth through achievement are probably engendered in childhood, long before the institutional stage evolves (Kaplan, 1989), but perhaps these qualities assume their full force only when the institutional meaning structure is available to channel effort. According to this view, the self-regulation of the identity focuses existing ambition and imparts endurance.

Good managers are capable of impressive efforts and are frequently characterized as having enormous energy. They drive themselves hard and

have high expectations for themselves (Kaplan, 1989). They are prized in their organizations for their willingness and ability to perform large amounts of work and put in long hours. The managers I have studied usually scored high on psychological measures of the Adjective Checklist of Gough and Heilbrun (1983) addressing the need for achievement and endurance. The institutional stage provides the internal regulation (inner discipline) producing persistence in the face of obstacles (commonly called “drive”). I have never encountered an executive who was well regarded in his organization who was not described as having drive. For example, the following comments were made by the co-workers of a typical highly successful manager: “[He is] willing to do the things necessary to have success.” “He never loses sight of the goals.” “He never lets up.” The manager’s drive was also well known to his family members, one of whom said, “He drives to be the best he can be and works around barriers.” These types of comments are quite typical of successful managers I have known.

The capacity for accountability and responsibility also arises from the system of internal regulation engendered in the institutional stage. Accountability is the willingness to be held responsible for results, actions, and decisions. It is the foundation of responsibility. Effective managers will take on great responsibilities and follow through with them with enormous persistence. One manager who is typical of many I have studied was described by a member of his staff as a “follow-up maniac.” Effective managers work out elaborate systems to help them in this regard, but I believe their internal systems of regulation provide the main impetus. The willingness to take initiative is perhaps valued even more than follow-up. “Whatever the problem is, he’ll tackle it,” was one typical comment. Another person said of the same manager, “He has a tremendous ability to take on a big project [because he is] intense in understanding the detail of what he’s responsible for.”

According to this view, if a manager in the institutional stage fails to take the initiative, fails to follow through, or fails to discharge a responsibility, her or his very identity will be called to account. As is noted in the following section discussing the limits imposed by the system of self-regulation, being unable to “see through” their identity, managers tend to

equate their actions and performance with identity (that is, to do is to be). This ensures that a highly motivated, dependable performer will see things through to the end. In my experience, the failure to discharge responsibility is so meaningful to the identity of managers that they either overattribute such failures to personal failings (even when other reasons for them exist) or defensively underplay their roles in the failures.

Finally, the institutional stage of meaning evolution corresponds to and flourishes in what Jaques (1989) calls the “accountability hierarchy.” I believe that many of our present organizations have arisen from the predominant meaning structure of the white men firmly entrenched in this stage who have largely formed these organizations. This type of organization, with its system of hierarchical accountability and its regulatory mechanisms, is a fitting environment for the self-regulating internal government of the institutional stage. Again, the successful managers I have studied usually receive high marks in this regard. They are valued for their ability to “work the system well,” to “bring together a lot of resources,” and to “make large organizations respond.” The hierarchy is an arena in which highly distinct, separate, autonomous individuals can find a common ground of accountability in which to pursue their ambitions and needs for achievement and personal enhancement.

As noted above, this capacity engenders a related limit. Created along with the strengths resulting from the capacity to self-regulate are weaknesses resulting from the way in which a person in the institutional stage is subject to identity—that is, the fact that the person sees with and cannot see through the identity. To be thus embedded in identity is to be subject not only to an internal government of laws and regulations, but also to a government that does not allow one to appeal any of these laws and regulations (Kegan, 1982). The self is the government that the self is trying to administer. The demands of this government are therefore ultimate in something like the way kings of old were above the law.

The embeddedness or subjectivity of the identity in this stage imposes limits leading to two main weaknesses: blindness to the demands of the internal self-regulatory system, and an inflexibility resulting from the naturally ideological nature of the autonomous self.

The most evident weakness created by this “ultimacy” of the self system is “workaholism”—the almost obsessive way many managers drive themselves. Although this drive itself is a strength, the inability to make choices and judgments about it often creates problems for managers. Many managers cannot stop working, even when they have discharged their responsibilities. They keep pushing themselves (and use this to justify their sometimes overzealous pushing of others). Many managers are unable to relax during vacations because they keep informed of events back on the job or think about work almost obsessively. Many managers I have studied confessed to adopting a managerial approach to the family vacation, planning and executing it as if it were a project at work, to the dismay of their families.

A related managerial weakness that arises from this limitation of the institutional stage—a weakness critical to our consideration of why managers have difficulty with empowerment—is not delegating well, which is being unable to trust subordinates to do important work for which the manager is responsible and accountable. For example, one manager told me, in answer to a question about his leading weaknesses, “I take on too much personally. I assume too many duties. There’s a lot of the perfectionist in me. I tend to think I can do a job better than anybody.” Here we see how the self-regulation and drive of the institutional stage—which as a strength accounts for this manager’s capacity to assume big responsibilities—also cause him to take on too much work, thereby making him a poor delegator.

The manager and I discussed this issue at length. Gradually we became aware that his tendency to “take on too much personally” was connected to some doubts he had about his capacity to discharge his extensive responsibilities (he was the director of a major corporate marketing function). Performing much of the important work himself was his way of dealing with this anxiety because it gave him a greater sense of personal control. He interpreted this as being driven by a “fear of failure.” According to the viewpoint discussed here, however, his assumption of “too many duties” is connected to the “ultimacy” of his identity. Because he is embedded in an autonomous, self-regulating identity focused on achievement—because he sees with this identity—he cannot appeal the demands of that

identity. As shown in the discussion of the strengths of accountability, failing to perform or to discharge his responsibilities would cause him to risk a devastating loss of meaning, a loss of self. If the manager could see through this identity rather than with it, he would be more able to make choices and judgments about the demands associated with it and would thus see his performance of his duty as just that, and not as a performance of self, of identity.

Being subject to one's identity—the ultimacy of the identity—also means that one is subject to the ideology of the identity. Identity in this context is ideological in that it is devoted to the truth or correctness of its cause. The inability to be objective about one's identity—seeing with it—means that one cannot see through the identity and make choices and judgments about it. Whatever makes the identity make sense is considered inevitable and right.

One manager, upon hearing responses from people interviewed who criticized his method of managing, responded to the suggestion that he could change some of this behavior by saying, "No, that's wrong. I am what I am." He was expressing his devotion to his identity, to his structure of meaning. What others considered ineffective behavior was to him an integral part of who he was, of what made sense for him, and therefore could not be wrong. Others might perceive his behavior as ineffective, but in an essential, meaning-making sense it had to be right.

This sense of being right, or the sense that one's way of making sense must be right, may account for the difficulty many managers have in accepting criticism of their behavior from others. Often, in reporting their own weaknesses, managers I have worked with have presented this information as if they were simply repeating what others have said about them, without indicating whether they agreed with them or not. For example, one manager's entire description of his weaknesses consisted of a single statement: "I would guess that my subordinates would say that I get too involved in their business." At other times, the managers justify self-reported weaknesses by making them seem like virtues. "I'm impatient," one manager said in answer to the question about his weaknesses. "I have to watch myself getting impatient when time and resources are being wasted. It's become an obsession. I just don't like it."

Another consequence of this ideological devotion to the cause of the identity is a marked difficulty in appreciating the ideas and feelings of others. This is often manifested as an inability to respect another person, and may be especially evident when the other person is of a different ethnic background or gender. This difficulty is illustrated by comments such as “He needs to be more tolerant of other people’s ideas,” or “He’s more interested in telling people what he wants them to know than in hearing what they have to say.” If work relationships are indeed based on respect, the inability to respect another person should have serious negative consequences for such relationships. One can speculate that this ideological aspect of the institutional stage of development is a powerful factor in the difficulty women and people of color have in becoming integrated into corporate life.

Table 1 summarizes the typical managerial strengths and weaknesses that arise from the capacities and limits of the institutional stage of development. This summary sketches a portrait of the “typical” successful manager, whose effectiveness stems in part from that person’s institutional meaning structure. Such a manager would be known as a personable, cordial person who could, when required, take tough-but-fair action without becoming upset. This person would make decisions based on cool, rational analysis relatively unhindered by emotional considerations. The manager would be a “self-starter,” with much initiative and focused ambition, willing to work long and hard for personal and organizational success. This person would be willing to take on large responsibilities and be held accountable for the results. The individual would be comfortable and skilled in organizational life and would be able to manipulate the system to obtain results from others. Yet this successful manager would have some difficulty forming close relationships and dealing with emotions, especially strong emotions involving others, such as affection or anger. The manager would have trouble relaxing and getting distance from the job. People would have difficulty criticizing this manager, as the manager would tend to react defensively or aggressively. Finally, this person would have trouble comprehending the value of the ideas, opinions, and emotional responses of others.

Table 1

**Typical Managerial Strengths and Weaknesses
Related to the Institutional Stage of Development**

	<i>Related typical managerial strengths</i>	<i>Related typical managerial weaknesses</i>
<i>Capacity (limit) of the institutional stage</i>		
Ability to take interpersonal relationships as object (difficulty with intimacy)	Forms good working relationships in organizations as now constituted Comfort with instrumental relationships “Head” over “heart” in decision making	Difficulty confronting or resolving conflicts Difficulty with feelings of affection or affiliation Difficulty being aware of or expressing emotion
Internal system of self-regulation; internal self-government (the ultimacy of the self-system; no appeal from the demands of self-government)	Adds drive and focus to ambition Willingness to assume large responsibilities Willingness to be held accountable Comfortable managing and working in a hierarchical system of authority and accountability	Difficulty letting up, relaxing, making judgments about drive, ambition Difficulty accepting criticism Difficulty appreciating and accepting others

How might the qualities given in this sketch be combined to create effectiveness? How does the institutional manager become successful? In my experience, success results from the manager’s ability to enlist other people to her or his cause. In other words, the institutional manager can get other people to work for what the manager wants, which transforms what the manager wants from a personal desire into a common, coordinating purpose. This happens in two ways. First, the manager can enlist people to her or his cause because the manager lives a “cause”—that is, the manager is devoted deeply and fundamentally to an identity, and that identity is connected to that person’s ambitions for her- or himself and the organiza-

tion. The manager demonstrates belief in the cause of his or her identity by showing confidence in it and a willingness to work long and hard in pursuit of it. Second, the manager can take what is essentially her or his own cause and transform it into a common, coordinating purpose. The manager does this by forming relationships based on mutual respect and loyalty that are effective working relationships because of the manager's toughness but fairness and willingness to judge people by results. Then the manager can coordinate, marshal, organize, and hold people accountable within the hierarchical system and thus "make things happen" while imparting to good performers a sense of autonomy. Enlisting others to one's cause and making that cause a coordinating purpose is the essence of effective leadership in an organization structured and managed by people in the institutional stage of development.

The institutional manager's weaknesses lie in that person's inability to find a context of meaning for her- or himself and the organization that includes more than just the manager's own identity. Her or his cause and identity are isomorphic. Thus, threats to her or his identity are threats to the cause, and vice versa. In the current environment of the institutional organization, these limitations and their related weaknesses are seen as unimportant. Otherwise, institutional managers would not have reached the level they have reached in organizations. But in some circumstances the limitations of institutional managers might be very important—circumstances in which managers in the institutional stage of development would not be nearly as effective. This brings us back to the topic of empowerment.

Empowerment as a Developmental Goal

This article began by noting that empowerment is a concept that even good managers with good intentions have difficulty putting into practice.

Because organizations are constructed to take advantage of the strengths of the institutional stage and to work around its weaknesses, attempts by individual managers to develop beyond the institutional way of structuring meaning may make them risk losing effectiveness. Managers sense this. A leading reason for resisting attempts at inner-directed change is the fear of losing effectiveness by tampering with a “winning formula” (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1985). The essence of the winning formula is, I suggest, the pattern of strength and weakness associated with a particular meaning structure, that is, the meaning structure of the institutional stage.

Development of meaning also implies movement away from a fundamental orientation (the balance of self and other) and toward the opposite orientation. No matter how slight this shift, it is always significant because for a person (a manager) to grow personally, he or she must give up a deeply personal meaning, a fundamental way of understanding the self and relating the self to the world. Second, in moving away from a system of meaning that generates coherence, development of meaning implies a movement toward potential meaninglessness. Thus, development means giving up something of great personal value (a working system of coherence and meaning) and moving toward a condition of unknown coherence and meaning.

For any person, such a change in the very structure of self, of what literally gives meaning to life, is deeply troubling because it involves the repudiation of a current meaning-generating structure. This results in anxiety, anger, and a sense of dislocation and alienation. For a successful manager, such a developmental movement is hindered further by the manager’s adaptation and commitment to a career that favors one of these stages of development over the others: the institutional stage. The organization as a cultural setting places extraordinary value on managers who

have attained this stage of development. The great risks of giving up a current meaning-making structure that people in general face are greatly magnified in the careers of managers in large organizations.

For institutional managers, further development—to the extent that such development is indeed the development of structures of meaning—calls for evolving toward personal meanings that allow them to embrace a context of meaning wider than their own identity. To develop further, the manager must learn to take her or his identity as an object so that the very structure of self can be open to examination, the demands of the identity can be contemplated and evaluated by the self, and the person can find deeper relatedness and intimacy with others without risking a loss of self in the process.

Kegan (1982) calls this structure of meaning or stage of development the “interindividual.” If the interpersonal stage is dependent and the institutional stage is autonomous and independent, the interindividual stage is interdependent. Managers in this stage would relate to one another differently and would create organizations different from current organizations.

Interindividual managers in interindividual organizations might be able to truly empower subordinates. As things stand now, I suspect that empowerment means, not really the giving to, or creation of power in, subordinates; rather it means something more like, as one manager put it, “empowering you to do what I want.” In organizations as they are now constituted, and with today’s managers, empowerment is something of a sham. It is a word that stands for an idea that managers should not really be expected to carry out without profound development of themselves and their organizations.

Torbert (1976) describes the possibility of organizations engaging in what he calls a “community of inquiry.” Perhaps many of the features of this kind of organization would emerge if managers were to evolve toward the interindividual structure of meaning. These features include: shared and open discourse on mission and goals; personal openness and interpersonal disclosure far beyond what is currently assumed to be required in working relationships; and a shared and collaboratively derived understanding of

the sociohistorical context of the organization that would lead to informed decision making.

This seems to be a vision of empowerment that reaches considerably beyond the sense of “empowering you to do what I want.” A “shared and open discourse on mission and goals” implies a mutually determined meaning system for the organization itself. This shifts away significantly from the current sense in which an organization functions according to the leader’s “vision,” “agenda,” or “cause.”

Under the current institutional meaning structure for organizations, the leader’s vision—even in the best cases in which the vision takes account of the needs of organizational members—functions as a predominantly individual center of gravity for the overall meaning of the organization. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the leader makes the organization make sense. The leader’s primary function in such an organization is to hold the organization together according to her or his vision, agenda, or cause. This mirrors the way people in the institutional stage of development hold together their identity and guard its integrity. Under this system of meaning, empowerment probably cannot be anything more than a tool for making the influence process easier to bear; in current organizations, it is still the agenda of individual leaders that must be acted upon. Allowing “subordinates” the power to alter this agenda all too often only creates confusion and senselessness.

Under an evolved “interindividual” meaning structure, organizational leaders and members would interdependently (collaboratively) derive a mission or goal (whatever makes the organization make sense) that would form a context larger than any individual identity, including that of the leader. The leader’s function would then be to maintain and enhance the processes of the collaborative community that make the meaning of the organization.

In such an organization, the strengths of effective leaders would be different from the strengths associated with the institutional stage. Working in a context of meaning wider than the meaning of the manager’s own identity (from which personal meaning is derived) would still require drive, ambition, and energy, but the drive would be directed less toward the

achievement of personal meaning and more toward the achievement of meaning for the organization. The demands of this drive and ambition would be open to evaluation and judgment by the leader and, perhaps more significantly, by the organization as a whole. Managers in such an organization would still need to be held accountable, but less to the expectations of the leader as derived from a personal vision and more to the expectations of the organization as derived from the collaboratively evolved vision of the “community.”

Perhaps the most significant result would be the shift in what would be considered strength in the interpersonal domain. The collaborative and shared nature of such an organization implies an openness, sense of affiliation, and even intimacy greater than that now practiced in organizations. Tough decisions would still have to be made, but the equations of analysis would more effectively include the emotional as well as the rational, and the preservation of the meaningfulness of the organization as a whole would be a leading analytical factor. Conflicts would still arise, but organization members would have a greater tendency to deal with them openly and less need to pretend they do not exist. Diversity in ethnicity, gender, and philosophical and cognitive outlook would be more prized as a resource and less feared as a threat to the unity and integrity of the leader’s identity-based cause or vision.

These changes are not utopian. People will still strive and contend and worry and hurt one another. There will be poorly managed versions of such organizations as well as effective ones, just as organizations are poorly and well managed now. The real difference will lie in how it feels to work in such an organization, and the word *empowered* may capture the essence of this feeling as well as any other. As professionals working to help managers and organizations, we call for empowerment and greater participation, and many organizations are trying hard to make this happen. But we are not there yet. A great deal of personal and organizational evolution and development must still occur.

Perhaps women will help us move toward this evolution in organizations. The increasing number of female managers might create a disturbance in the current self-sealing meaning system that could lead to signifi-

cant development of managers and their organizations. Studies on what makes women managers successful point to this possibility, for what makes women effective appears to be slightly but significantly different from what makes men effective. As Watson (1988) concludes, "Women who wish to be effective leaders should be encouraged to behave considerably and to improve their participative management skills, not to act more like men." As we have seen, *if what makes sense as a strength* in organizations changes, this signals an evolution in how organizations themselves make sense.

Note

¹The word *stage* is troublesome in this context because it implies fixed boundaries around highly generalizable periods of human growth. I use this word anyway because Kegan (1982) does describe generalizable features in what people perceive as subject and object as they grow and develop. Kegan actually uses the word *balance* instead of stage to express the dynamic tension between the developmental stages. I also use the terms *structure of meaning* and *state* as synonyms for *stage*.

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