

Managers Are Oppressed Too

Managers are in a somewhat unique role in society—managers are agents of oppression towards workers and, at the same time, managers are oppressed as workers by the class system. It is clear that people who are managers must have been deeply and systematically hurt by the oppressive system of classism to condition them to act in hurtful ways towards other workers.

Some things that I have found helpful in my work with managers are:

1. Appreciate managers for taking on the activity of managing. Managers are leaders and it is brave to lead. As we know, leadership is essential in order for things to go well. Managing (as leading) is an essential and good human activity.

2. Provide managers with the opportunity to talk about what work is really like. This is especially important to help managers to face, feel, and discharge on being agents of oppression in the workplace. Almost all managers are called upon in their organizations to develop, communicate, and enforce rigid patterns that are, in effect, anti-human. Providing the opportunity to talk about what work is really like is also useful in assisting managers to discharge on what it is like to be a worker and to be oppressed as a worker.

This opportunity to talk about what being a manager is really like is a direct contradiction to the systematically enforced isolation of managers. Who can a manager get close to and communicate honestly with? Not peers—peers are competitors, almost enemies, to be outmaneuvered and outsmarted. Not bosses—bosses are to be kept in the dark, especially about weaknesses or mistakes. And certainly not subordinates—information must be withheld from subordinates in order to retain control and appear powerful.

Furthermore, there is a stream of anti-management sentiment in liberal/left culture in the United States that interferes with managers feeling safe enough to talk about what managing is like. One poignant, personal example of this culture is that I was once in a situation as a manager where I crossed union picket lines for a month because of a strike by union workers against the company at which we worked. During that time, I was consistently asked by friends and Co-Counselors about the striking workers and never asked (until I took charge of the situation) about what the strike was like for me or others in management.

It is important to provide managers with the opportunity to talk about what work and managing is really like.

3. Another important issue for managers is powerlessness. There is an illusion that the role of manager gives an individual manager power. There are opportunities created within the system for managers to exercise control/authority. But the appearance of power is false—managers are workers, too, and the class system attempts to rob all workers of real power. Many managers operate in environments in which tremendous fear is systematically installed on them regarding making mistakes or failing.

I have found that directions regarding reclaiming power and decisions to make changes are very useful for managers.

Managers need to work on the issues of isolation and powerlessness in order to reclaim their full humanness in the workplace. Managers' support groups provide an excellent place for managers to discharge these patterns. Onward with Managers' Liberation!

*Michael Markovits
Melrose, Massachusetts, USA*

