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*Influence Tactics as a Function of Supervisor Age*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the  
Parker College of Business

By  
Zachary Weiner

Under the mentorship of Dr David Sikora

Abstract

Within the field of Human Resource Management, the topic of age-related differences within the workforce has been of interest as a method of understanding the dynamics of workforce management. This study aims to develop a deeper understanding in age related differences by focusing specifically on influence tactics subordinates use to influence their supervisors. The current research shows gaps in the understanding of how the comparative age of a supervisor (the age of a supervisor compared to the age of a subordinate i.e., older, younger) affect the use of influence tactics. This study shows how the comparative age of a supervisor affects the use of influence tactics. This study additionally looks at the relationship between influence tactics and organizational commitment.

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### **Age Differences in the Workplace Overview**

In recent years, the number of older persons remaining in the workforce past the retirement age has increased. This has created a workplace where there are five different generations working together. Subramanian (2017) defines the five generations of the workforce as: Gen Z, Gen Y, Gen X, Baby Boomers, and Greatest Generation (youngest to oldest). Subramanian (2017) additionally indicates that present opinions of the generational gap have influenced organizational structure and procedure specifically highlighting each generation's preferred learning style and aspirational goals. It was portrayed that the Greatest Generation's aspirational goal was home ownership, Baby Boomer's was Job Security, Gen X's was work-life balance, Gen Y's was Freedom and Flexibility, and Gen Z's was Security and Stability. The varying aspirational goals have changed the procedures offered by organizations which can be seen with the advent of tele-commuting and flex-time schedules. Buheji (2019) found that both the density of generational gaps and the scope of generational gaps have increased over this millennium. The increase in the scope of generational gaps is due to the rise of technology, and to overcome the increased distance between language and communication style between different generations, each generation must overcome a communication gap (Buheji, 2017).

Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher (2018) indicate that studies of generational differences within the workplace are logically inconsistent because there are varying groupings of generations and proposes the lifespan perspective as an opposing framework to generational cohorts. Within the lifespan viewpoint, each supervisor will approach a task or goal based on certain milestones they have passed within their life (Rudolph et al., 2018).

Further research was conducted to investigate age related differences that exist within the workforce. Lord and Farrington (2006) found that when considering all job factors, there is no difference in the overall level of job satisfaction between older and younger workers. It was found that the importance of job-related factors and the level of importance for motivational factors differs based on the age of the worker. Therefore, strategies that increase the motivation for older workers may not be as effective for younger workers. While job satisfaction is consistent among the various demographics in the workplace, the factors contributing to the level of job satisfaction vary among the demographic groups. It appears that problems from age differences within the workforce likely can be attributed to the age differences within the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

A study conducted by Perry, Kulik, and Zhou (1999) found that subordinates respond positively in terms of absenteeism, and that subordinates who were older than their supervisors engaged in negatively motivated work behaviors more frequently. Subramanian (2017) highlighted how the varying communication style of each generation can contribute to conflict within the organization emphasizing that Baby Boomers and Gen X prefer face to face interactions, but will use text messaging or email, while Gen Y and Gen Z tend to prefer online or social media. Urbantke (2006) found that the conflict management style of supervisors is dependent on the age of their subordinates.

Collins, Hair, and Rocco (2009) conducted a study that investigated the expectation of effective leadership behaviors as a function of age relative to subordinates, and found that subordinates expect less effective leadership behaviors when there is a negative age

difference between them and their supervisor. Additionally, supervisors with subordinates older than them receive lower evaluations of their leadership behaviors than supervisors with subordinates younger than them. This phenomenon is known as the reverse Pygmalion effect in which the traditional hierarchy within an organization where a manager is seen as having wisdom and being able to mentor is disrupted by the manager being younger than the workers (Collins et al., 2009). Another study conducted by Ferris, Judge, Chachere, and Liden (1991) investigated the effect of age in performance evaluations. Ferris et al., (1991) found that in the context of performance evaluations, supervisors followed the dissimilarity model of age demography in which supervisors tended to give higher performance ratings to subordinates who are in a dissimilar demographic cohort than themselves. This phenomenon is believed to be attributed to the sense of competition that exists between peers within a demographic group.

Multiple studies were conducted to determine how manager age affects the workplace. Shore, Cleveland, and Goldberg (2003) found that similarity in employee-manager age produced the highest ratings in work attitude and that employees who are older than their manager tend to receive more negative evaluations and less opportunities for training and development compared to employees who have a similar age to their manager. Vecchio (1993) found that employee age positively correlated with supervisor performance ratings and propensity not to quit, and that younger raters were found to give significantly higher ratings than older raters on interpersonal skill dimensions. Perry et al., (1999) found that subordinates respond positively in terms of less absenteeism and more citizenship behaviors when they were older than their immediate supervisors and that older

subordinates view having a younger supervisor as negative to their status. Through these studies it is evident that age difference has a significant impact on supervisor-subordinate relationships. Within these studies, there was an objective to: identify the organizational contexts in which directional or nondirectional demographic differences are most likely to be predictive of work outcomes (Perry et al., 1999), research work group demography influence on organizational decisions (Ferris et al., 1991), and research that would increase the understanding of potential performance effects of expectancies on the supervisor-subordinate dyad (Collins et al., 2009).

To better understand the perspective of young managers, Tonks, Dickenson, and Nelson (2009) conducted a qualitative study on the perspectives of young managers who have older employees and older employees who have younger managers. It was found that young managers placed more trust in the older workers than those workers placed in their young managers. This further reinforced the viewpoint shared by both sides that the young manager lacked the relevant managerial experience to properly manage a team of older workers. Urbantke (2006) investigated the conflict management styles of young supervisors relative to older supervisors. It was found that younger supervisors generally prefer the avoiding style of managing conflict with their older subordinates, and that younger supervisors tend to avoid the collaborating style of managing conflict with their older subordinates. These studies show that younger supervisors face difficulties in managing older subordinates, and that older subordinates place little value in the leadership of a younger supervisor.

In response to appeals to conduct further research investigating workplace variables as a function of age (Shore et al., 2003; Tonks et al., 2009; Urbantke, 2006; Perry et al., 1999), the purpose of this study is to test which influence tactics tend to be used on supervisors as a function of subordinate age. In doing so, it is hoped a greater understanding of the reverse **Pygmalion** effect and its relation to organizational decision making will be found (Collins et al., 2009). This study aims to contribute to the literature by increasing the understanding of the relationship between young supervisors and their older subordinates (Tonks et al., 2009; Urbantke, 2006).

### **Hypothesis Development**

Research has highlighted the negative view held by older subordinates affects the leadership behaviors displayed by younger supervisors. This study will further this research by looking at factors affecting the influence tactics used by subordinates on their supervisors. The factors to be examined are derived from the influence tactics model developed by Schriesheim and Hinkin (1990). The model created by Schriesheim and Hinkin proposes six different types of influence tactics used by subordinates on their supervisors. The six influence tactics are: ingratiation, exchange of benefits, coalition, assertiveness, logic, and reporting up the chain of command.

Ingratiation involves complimenting someone to gain their favor. The thought behind ingratiation is that the person receiving the compliment will be more likely to agree with the person who gave them the compliment. Young subordinates likely have a more positive



view of their supervisor than older subordinates therefore, young subordinates will seek to turn their supervisor into an ally within their organization.

*Hypothesis 1:* Subordinates who are younger than their supervisors will have a positive relationship with ingratiation.

An exchange of benefits occurs when one person performs an action or favor for someone so that they will perform a certain task for them. Older subordinates tend to view their supervisor as ineffective and negatively react to additional tasks assigned to them by their supervisor.

*Hypothesis 2:* Subordinates who are younger than their supervisors will have a positive relationship with exchange of benefits.

A coalition is a group of people therefore, using coalition as an influence tactic involves gathering a group of people to mobilize and speak to the collective supervisor as a group. Following traditional age-related hierarchies, those older had more influence than those younger, so older subordinates will not feel the need to gather “strength in numbers” to influence a supervisor who is younger than them.

*Hypothesis 3:* Subordinates who are younger than their supervisors will have a positive relationship with coalition.

Assertiveness tactics involve speaking one's mind directly to their supervisor. This is the most confrontational influence tactic outlined by Schriesheim and Hinkin (1990). Older subordinates often view their supervisors as being ineffective; therefore, older subordinates will not have as many reservations confronting their supervisors.

*Hypothesis 4:* Subordinates who are younger than their supervisors will have a negative relationship with assertiveness.

Rationality involves presenting facts and statistics to one's supervisor to portray why a certain task should be carried out. In looking at knowledge workers, the subordinates and supervisors are often driven by relevant data in addition to the hierarchy that exists within the organization.

*Hypothesis 5:* Rationality will be used equally by subordinates who are younger than their supervisors and subordinates who are older than their supervisors.

Reporting up the chain of command is one of more confrontational methods used to influence one's supervisor. In using this method of influence, the subordinate reports to their supervisor's supervisor. This method tends to make the supervisor feel betrayed. Older subordinates tend to view their supervisors as lacking relevant managerial experience to properly manage them.

*Hypothesis 6:* Subordinates who are younger than their supervisor will have a negative relationship with reporting up the chain of command.

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedure**

This study used an online survey sent to career professionals through Qualtric's online survey platform. For this study, a career professional was defined as college graduates who have been working in their job for the period of a year or more. College students were asked to refer career professionals to fill out the online survey in exchange for extra credit in Dr. Sikora's course. By accumulating referrals, the survey used a snowball effect allowing for a sampling of various industries. This study focused on differences between subordinate age and supervisor age. Both ages were self-reported within the survey. After the data was collected, a statistical analysis using SPSS software was conducted.

### **Measures**

This survey consisted of factors that can have an impact on influence tactics used by subordinates as a reflection of their supervisor's age. These measures included:

**Influence Tactics.** This survey used the model created by Schriesheim and Hinkin (1990). This model employs a 5-point Likert scale that describes the behavior and asks the participant to fill out the survey based on the frequency they display the behavior with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The influence tactics measure was further divided into six sub-measures of ingratiation, exchange of benefits, rationality,

assertiveness, upward appeal, and coalition. An example of ingratiation ( $\alpha = .73$ ) is “Acted in a friendly manner prior to asking for what I wanted.” An example of exchange of benefits ( $\alpha = .74$ ) is “Offered an exchange (e.g., if you do this for me, I will do something for you)”. An example of rationality ( $\alpha = .78$ ) is “Used logic to convince him or her”. An example of assertiveness ( $\alpha = .73$ ) is “Expressed my anger verbally”. An example of upward appeal ( $\alpha = .79$ ) is “Obtained the informal support of the higher-ups”. An example of coalition ( $\alpha = .83$ ) is “Obtained the support of co-workers to back up my request”.

**Organizational Commitment.** This survey used the model based on the organizational commitment model created by Allen and Meyer (1993). The model ( $\alpha = .60$ ) is a 15-item inventory using a 5-point scale. These items asked participants to answer how often in the past sixth months they thought of leaving their job. An example item is “How often have you considered leaving your job?”. Answers were chosen from a range of Always to Never.

**Demographics.** Demographic data **included** the age (self-reported) of the worker and their immediate supervisor to establish the age difference between the subordinate and their supervisor. Additional data included the industry that the survey participant worked in, the level that the participant works at in their organization (ex: associate, manager, front-line worker, etc.), and the level that the participant’s supervisor works at in their organization.

## Results

To ensure the dataset had no problems or issues, basic statistical information was examined for each item through frequency and descriptive charts. Every measure used in this study

was placed into a composite group, and frequency and descriptive charts were then completed for each composite group.

### **Respondents**

This survey had 257 respondents. Of those 257, 1.17% identified as Asian, 21.01% identified as Black or African American, .39% identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 74.32% identified as White, and 3.11% identified as Other. 33.85% of respondents identified as male, and 66.15% identified as female. This survey asked respondents to indicate their level of experience in their job ranging from “I have never had a job” to “More than 10 years”. The demographics for this question are as follows: 1.95% of respondents have never had a job, 9.34% of respondents had less than a year of experience, 15.56% of respondents had 1-2 years of experience, 30.74% of respondents had 3-5 years of experience, 11.28% of respondents had 6-10 years of experience, and 21.12% of respondents had more than 10 years of experience. In addition to years of experience, respondents were asked what level within their organization their current job was. The demographics for this question are as follows: 45.91% were entry-level, 8.56% were clerical/administrative, 14.79% were professional, 9.73% were first-level supervisors or managers, 4.67% were department managers, 3.11% were directors, 3.89% were vice presidents or above, and 9.34% described their position levels as other. These responses ranged from intern level to owning a private company. Respondents were asked how long they had been working for their current employer. Answers ranged from “I do not have a job currently” to “More than 10 years”. The demographics for this question are as follows: 10.51% of respondents did not have a job at the time they completed the survey, 23.74% of respondents had been working for their employer for less than a year, 27.63% of

respondents had been working for their employer for 1-2 years, 15.56% of respondents had been working for their employer for 3-5 years, 7.78% of respondents had been working for their employer for 6-10 years, and 14.79% of respondents had been working for their employer for more than 10 years. The majority of respondents worked in a private or publicly traded company (66.93%); however, 1.95% of respondents worked in non-profits, 5.06% worked in the government, 15.18% worked in a school or other educational organization, and 10.89% listed their type of organization as other (responses for this included hospital and union employees). Respondents were asked about the size of their organization. Of the total population, 9.73% did not have a job at the time of the survey, 33.85% of the respondents worked for a company that had 1-25 employees, 16.34% of respondents worked for a company that had 26-50 employees, 12.06% worked for a company that had 51-100 employees, 15.18% worked for a company that had 101-1000 employees, 5.06% worked for a company that had 1001-5000 employees, and 7.78% worked for a company that had over 5000 employees. This survey asked respondents whether they were older, younger, or the same age as their supervisor. 76.26% of the respondents were younger than their supervisor, 14.40% of the respondents were older than their supervisor, and 9.34% of the respondents were the same age as their supervisor.

### **Hypotheses Testing**

Regarding the initial hypotheses, the relationship between the comparative age of a supervisor (whether the supervisor was older or younger than the subordinate) and the influence tactic of ingratiation was non-significant ( $P > .05$ ). As a result, hypothesis 1 was not supported. The next hypothesis concerned the comparative age of a supervisor and the use of exchange of benefits as an influence tactic. This relationship was significant ( $\beta =$

.13,  $P < .05$ ) at the 95% level, thus supporting hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 looked at the relationship between the comparative age of a supervisor and the use of coalition as an influence tactic. This relationship was found to be non-significant ( $P > .05$ ). As a result, hypothesis 3 was not supported. Hypothesis 4 looked at the relationship between the comparative age of a supervisor and the use of assertiveness as an influence tactic. This relationship was found to be non-significant ( $P > .05$ ), refuting hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5 looked at the relationship between comparative age of a supervisor and the use of rationally as an influence tactic. This relationship was found to be significant ( $\beta = -.22, P < .01$ ). This provides support for hypothesis 5. Finally, hypothesis 6 looked at the relationship between comparative age of a supervisor and the use of upward appeal as an influence tactic. This relationship was found to be non-significant ( $P > .05$ ), invalidating hypothesis 6.

### **Additional Findings**

By including an additional metric (organizational commitment) in the survey, there was additional raw data for statistical analysis. The remainder of this section will discuss the insight found during this analysis.

The relationship between comparative age of a supervisor and organizational commitment was found to be significant ( $\beta = .23, P < .01$ ). The presence of this relationship led to the testing of each influence tactic as a predictor for organizational commitment. The relationship between the use of ingratiation as an influence tactic and organizational commitment was found to be significant ( $\beta = .13, P < .05$ ). The relationship between exchange of benefits as an influence tactic and organizational commitment was found to be significant ( $\beta = .28, P < .05$ ). The relationship between the use of rationality and organizational commitment was found to be non-significant ( $P > .05$ ). The relationship

between the use of assertiveness as an influence tactic and organizational commitment was found to be significant ( $\beta = .29, P < .05$ ). The relationship between the use of upward appeal as an influence tactic and organizational commitment ( $\beta = .25, P < .05$ ). Finally, the relationship between the use of coalition as an influence tactic and organizational commitment was found to be significant ( $\beta = .23, P < .05$ ). After running single predictor linear regression tests using the six influence tactics as predictors of organizational commitment, a multiple linear regression test was done using assertiveness and upward appeal as predictors of organizational commitment (these two predictors were chosen for the multiple regression model based on their predictive strength shown in the single regression models). This relationship was found to be significant ( $\beta = .224, P < .01$  and  $\beta = .15, P < .05$ ).

### **Discussion**

The comparative age of a supervisor cannot be used to predict the use of ingratiation, coalition, assertiveness, or upward appeal as an influence tactic. However, the comparative age of a supervisor can be used to predict the use of rationality and exchange of benefits as influence tactics. This study found that the relationship of comparative age of a supervisor is inversely related to the use of rationality as an influence tactic showing that subordinates who are older than their supervisor tend not to use rationality as a tactic of influencing their supervisor. It was also found that the relationship between the comparative age of a supervisor and the use of exchange of benefits as an influence tactic was positively related, signifying that subordinates who are older than their supervisor tend to use exchange of benefits as a tactic to influence their supervisor. The implications for young supervisors are that while younger subordinates tend to use rationality to explain and/or defend their



ideas or actions, older subordinates tend to use relationship management more. A possible explanation for this is that young, entry level subordinates may not have much meaningful experience within the workplace, therefore they are unable to provide meaningful benefits to their supervisor to exchange. Young subordinates rely on rationality to create, defend, and generate support for their ideas because this influence tactic can be used effectively by any subordinate regardless of their age or years of experience so long as the idea itself is rational. On the other hand, older subordinates have meaningful experience within their field. This experience allows them to complete assignments for their supervisors without having to be instructed how to complete the assignment. This allows for the older subordinates to utilize exchange of benefits to influence their supervisor.

Another interesting finding of this study was that the presence of rationality as an influence tactic had no significance in predicting organizational commitment while the presence of the other five influence tactics (ingratiation, exchange of benefits, assertiveness, upward appeal, and coalition) each had a positive relationship with organizational commitment. This implies that while employees (supervisors and subordinates alike) may say that they value rational explanations for workplace decisions, rationality as a method of influencing employees has no significant effect on the organizational commitment felt by employees. The two strongest predictors of organizational commitment were assertiveness ( $\beta = .29$ ) and exchange of benefits ( $\beta = .28$ ). A possible explanation for the relationship between the use of assertiveness as an influence tactic and organizational commitment is that subordinates who feel comfortable and stable in their job will not be afraid to be assertive with their supervisor. Typically, people tend not to be comfortable using assertiveness with a supervisor unless the supervisor and the subordinate have a good relationship. Another

explanation for this relationship could be that subordinates do not use assertiveness as an influence tactic until they have a high level of organizational commitment. A possible explanation for the relationship between the use of exchange of benefits as an influence tactic and organizational commitment is that the use of exchange of benefits promotes a stronger relationship between subordinates and supervisors which allows the subordinates to feel valued within the organization. The presence of these two relationships within the study could have implications for Human Resource departments in determining the level of organizational commitment in their organization. The presence of ingratiation, exchange of benefits, assertiveness, upward appeal, or coalition within their organization can indicate that the employees have higher levels of organizational commitment.

### **Strengths and Limitation of the Research**

One strength of the research was the diversity in the amount of tenure the survey participants had. 23.44% had worked at their job for less than a year, 27.73% worked at their job for 1-2 years, 15.63% had worked at their job for 3-5 years, 7.81% worked at their job for 6-10 years, 14.84% worked at their job for over 10 years, and 10.55% are currently unemployed. This diversity across tenure ensured that the relationships found in this study are not clustered in one specific group of employees, and as a result, makes these findings more generalizable. Furthermore, there was diversity in the size of the respondents' organizations. 33.85% of respondents worked for an organization with 1-25 employees, 16.34% of respondents worked for an organization with 26-50 employees, 12.06% of respondents worked for an organization with 51-100 employees, 15.18% of respondents worked for an organization with 101-1000 employees, 5.06% of respondents worked for

an organization with 1001-5000 employees, 7.78% of respondents worked for an organization with over 5000 employees, and 9.73% of respondents are currently unemployed. The lack of a cluster around one organizational size makes these findings more generalizable.

A limitation of this research comes from the reliability test of the organizational commitment composite group. When using SPSS software to run statistical tests on the dataset, Cronbach's alpha came back as .60. Ideally, the reliability for this measure should have been at least .70. Another limitation of this research is that most respondents were younger than their supervisor (76.26%) compared to the 9.34% of respondents who were older than their supervisor. Even when grouping the respondents who were the same age as their supervisor (14.40%) and respondents who were older than their supervisor (9.34%) there remains a significant cluster around respondents who were younger than their supervisor. Ideally, there would have been more respondents who were older than their supervisor which would have minimized the skewing of the data towards younger subordinates.

### **Future Research**

More research needs to be conducted on the effect of having a supervisor who is younger than their subordinates. As seen in the literature review, most research has been focused on generational cohorts while disregarding actual comparative age. Inconsistencies in the years that constitute membership in a generational cohort make the application of this research difficult, therefore, it may be beneficial to focus research on a demographic variable that is better defined. For this reason, research should focus on the difference in

age between supervisor and subordinate. Research should also be conducted analyzing the effect influence tactics have on organizational commitment. While this study found interesting relationships in this area, there is more to be learned from a deeper analysis of the topic.

### **Conclusion**

This research found that there is an inverse relationship between the use of rationality as an influence tactic and the comparative age of a supervisor. This signifies that employees tend to use rationality more when they are young and less as they age. The implications of this are that as younger employees begin to age and transition to different stages in their life, their use of rationality as an influence tactic will stagnate. This research also found a positive relationship with the comparative age of a supervisor and the use of exchange of benefits as an influence tactic. This signifies employees tend to increase their use of exchange of benefits as they age. The implications of this are that as employees age and progress within a company, their use of exchange of benefits likely will increase. An implication of both relationships is that when organizations hire an older employee, this employee will tend to use exchange of benefits to influence their supervisor rather than rationality.

Other findings in this research show that the use of assertiveness and upward appeal as influence tactics have positive relationships with organizational commitment. This suggests that subordinates who feel comfortable enough with their supervisors to express their anger verbally to them have higher organizational commitment than those who do not. Furthermore, subordinates who are able to contact management level positions above their immediate supervisor tend to have higher organizational commitment. The

implications of these relationships are that organizations having a low presence of these two influence tactics may find themselves having a workforce with lower organizational commitment. Based on this, employers should encourage supervisors to allow their subordinates to freely express their opinions and have people in a supervisory role develop relationships with employees beyond their immediate subordinates.

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