

Union Leadership and Member Participation

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Summary

THERE is a substantial body of research which documents the importance of the leader's interpersonal skills in determining the attitudes and behavior of group members. Most of this work has been done in industry and has been concentrated on the relationship between the foreman and his men. The present article represents an attempt to replicate several of the well-established industrial findings on a different population—union stewards and the members of their shops.

Participation in union activities was regarded as the analog of individual productivity, and it was predicted that this criterion would be related to the perceived leadership skills of the steward in (1) communicating to the men, (2) involving them in decision making, (3) providing "help" to the men, and (4) taking personal interest in how the men get along on the job.

These relationships were tested in four local unions of the industrial type in southern Michigan. The locals had been selected to differ with respect to the participation criterion. Data were collected by written questionnaire, with telephone and personal follow-up. Results were substantially as predicted, with the rank order of locals on the leadership dimensions corresponding closely to the ranking on the participation criterion.

Introduction

Social psychologists have shown a consistent and increasing interest in the area of leadership and human relations skills.

The Human Relations Program of the Survey Research Center, among others, has conducted a number of research projects in this area, the results of which have been summarized by Katz and Kahn, Likert and Seashore, and others (4, 5). One of the general conclusions which can be drawn from this research is that supervisory practices are of crucial importance in determining the productivity and satisfaction of industrial workers. While the leadership patterns which generate high productivity and satisfaction are not identical, the behavior of the immediate supervisor or primary group leader is a key determinant of both.

In studies of industrial organizations, we have looked on individual productivity as reflecting the amount of effort which an individual is motivated to expend in his organizational role. In the union local, we have thought of our measure of participation as defining operationally the same concept of individual in-puT of effort. Our general hypothesis in this area is that the interpersonal skills of the leader of the primary group (the steward) will determine in part the level of member participation in the union. More specifically, we predicted relationships between a union member's participation and his perception of the steward's skills in four aspects or functional areas of leadership.

The first of these refers to the steward's skills in communications. Many of the men depend heavily on the steward for information regarding the program and activities of the union. These messages may play an important part in interesting and motivating the member in local affairs. Communications from the steward may also facilitate member participation in ways quite distinct from questions of motivation. For example, knowledge of meeting times and issues to be discussed, election procedures, and the like may be given or denied the member according to the steward's diligence and skill in discharging the communications function. The possession of such information may be a necessary condition for some forms of participation. Of course, knowledge that a topic important to him is up

for discussion may also play a crucial part in motivating a member to attend a meeting.

The second aspect of the member-steward relationship which we measured deals with the practice of joint decision making. The literature dealing with the facilitative effects of such decision-making practices is too extensive to discuss here. We assumed that such behavior on the part of the steward would in fact increase the member's control over union affairs, make the experience of membership more rewarding psychologically, and for these reasons motivate him to greater participation.

The third of the leadership functions which we attempted to measure is less specific, and relates to the steward's ability to provide a resource and support for the men in his shop. The question was whether the men feel they can get help from the steward when they need it. It seems likely that this question was answered from several frames of reference. "Help" may mean a kind of technical resource, getting information about company rules and regulations, procedures to be followed with respect to making application for a better job or protesting some foreman action. "Help" may also refer to a more direct kind of support, the member's feeling that he has a friend of some standing and influence in the work situation.

Pelz has shown that the "acceptance" of a supervisor by his subordinates depends in part on his ability to help them achieve their goals, and that without such ability his interpersonal skills may be largely unappreciated (6). By asking union members whether they could "get help" from their steward, we hoped to get at his influence and knowledge, and also his skill and willingness to employ these resources in behalf of the members.

The last measure of steward leadership included in this study hits more directly at the interpersonal relationship between member and steward. In asking the member whether the steward really takes an interest in him, we were trying to get some measure of the affect which characterizes this inter-

personal relationship. Other research has demonstrated a connection between "employee-centered" supervision and productivity, and has indicated also that trust and liking may be a condition for the effective use of supervisory skills.* For these reasons we predicted a relationship between the member's perception of steward interest and the member's actual participation in the union.

The data presented below are taken from a study of membership participation in four local unions. The unions chosen for study are of the industrial type, are within the size-range of 350-850 members, and are located in Michigan. They were chosen to differ in their level of membership participation as measured by attendance at meetings, member activities at these meetings (such as making and seconding motions, asking questions, etc.), involvement in committee work, and voting in union elections. The locals are assigned fictitious names, and are, in descending order of membership participation: National, Sergeant, Ensign, Walker.

The locals were also found to differ in the degree to which the members consider themselves as exercising control over the affairs of their local (7, 8). Membership participation and membership influence in the local were found to correspond closely, with the order of locals on degree of membership control being: National, Ensign, Sergeant, Walker. It is within the context of these organizational characteristics that we shall present and discuss some of the differences in steward practices among the four locals.

Data were obtained by means of paper and pencil questionnaires employing fixed alternative responses. These questionnaires were developed after several months of observation and interview, and were administered to a representative sample of about 150 members in each local. The rate of questionnaire returns averaged over 90 percent.

* See for example: Katz, Daniel & Kahn, Robert. *Human Organization and Worker Motivation*. In Tripp, L. *et al.* (Eds.), *Industrial Productivity*. Madison, Wisc.: Industrial Relations Research Association, 1951; Mellinger, Glen. *Trust and Consequences*. *Adult Leadership*, 1955, 3, 8.

TABLE 1
Reported Communications Practices of Stewards

Local	Rank Order in Member Participation	Rank Order in Member Control	Doesn't keep us well informed (%)	Tries, but doesn't do too well	Usually keeps us well informed	Keeps us very well informed	Total per cent
National	1	1	10	12	46	32	100
Sergeant	2	3	17	23	43	17	100
Ensign	3	2	12	15	48	25	100
Walker	4	4	29	23	37	11	100

The Extent to Which the Stewards Keep the Members Informed about What is Going On in the Union

Table 1 presents data for the membership of each local, based on responses to the question: "How well does your steward keep you informed about what is going on in the union?"

The hypothesis that the level of membership participation in a local will vary directly with the extent to which the stewards keep the members informed receives some support. National, which ranks highest in participation, ranks correspondingly high in communications skills at the steward level. Walker, on the other hand, ranks lowest in both these respects. A correlation also appears to exist between membership control and the extent of steward communication. This finding tends to emphasize the importance of communication to the control process. No group, whether leadership or membership, can maintain effective control without having at its disposal appropriate information about the matters under consideration. This does not mean that communication *per se* carries the implication of control, but rather that the acquisition of pertinent information is one condition for the exercise of control. The mere fact of knowing will not give the members control over the affairs of their union; however, they certainly will not be able to institute control unless they do have knowledge.

TABLE 2
Reported Practices of Stewards in Involving Members in Decision Making

Local	Rank Order in Member Participation	Rank Order in Member Control	He never or hardly ever asks us (%)	He sometimes asks us	He often asks us	He always asks us	Total per cent
National	1	1	12	26	34	28	100
Sergeant	2	3	17	26	38	19	100
Ensign	3	2	29	26	29	16	100
Walker	4	4	31	28	22	19	100

The Extent to Which the Steward Asks the Members' Help in Deciding What Should be Done about Union Matters

Communication is seldom a one-way process. If stewards inform members about union affairs, the members may respond by offering their reactions or ideas. If the steward makes some systematic attempt to solicit such action, a process of joint decision making may be under way. An earlier study in the Human Relations Program demonstrated a relationship between the steward's involvement of the men in decision making and their degree of identification with the union (2). To illuminate the effects of this steward behavior on participation, each respondent was asked, "Does your steward ever ask the men to help him in deciding what should be done about union matters?" Table 2 presents data based on responses to this item.

The rank order of locals with respect to stewards' involvement of members in decision making (National, Sergeant, Ensign, Walker) corresponds exactly to the relative level of member participation in union affairs in these four locals. In the two active unions, and especially in National, the majority of stewards "often or always" involve the men in the decision-making process.

The Extent to Which the Steward Helps the Member in Need

A third important leadership function is that of resource person, a person to whom a member of the group can turn for assistance. Without attempting to differentiate among the

TABLE 3
Reported Assistance from Stewards

Local	Rank Order in Member Participation	Rank Order in Member Control	Hardly ever or seldom get help when I need it (%)	Sometimes get help	Usually get help	Always get help when I need it	Total per cent
National	1	1	2	7	29	62	100
Sergeant	2	3	2	8	45	45	100
Ensign	3	2	3	6	44	47	100
Walker	4	4	12	17	43	28	100

kinds of support which might be offered, we measured the steward's performance in this area by means of a single question. Each respondent was asked, "How much help do you feel you get from your steward when you really need it?" Table 3 presents data based on responses to this question.

Differences among locals follow roughly the predicted pattern. The local highest in participation, National, ranks highest also in reported assistance from stewards; the local lowest in participation, Walker, ranks correspondingly low on the variable of steward assistance. The intermediate locals, Ensign and Sergeant, are about equal in steward assistance. These data suggest that effective support on the part of the steward is an important aspect of the active union's mode of operation, and probably a key factor in its success.

The Amount of Interest Steward Takes in Members' Getting Along on the Job

One of the characteristics of successful leadership which has been demonstrated repeatedly in the industrial environment is a concern for, or interest in, the group member. The factor of *consideration* in the Ohio State Leadership studies and the concept of *employee-orientation* in the work of the Survey Research Center exemplify this fact (1, 3). In this study we were interested in getting some insight regarding the correlates of a similar attribute in union leadership. Each respondent was asked, "How much interest does your steward take in your

TABLE 4
Reported Interest of Stewards in Members on the Job

Local	Rank Order in Member Participation	Rank Order in Member Control	Takes no interest in me on job %	Takes a little interest in me on job	Takes quite a lot of interest in me on job	Takes a great deal of interest in me on job	Total per cent
National	1	1	5	12	32	51	100
Sergeant	2	3	6	25	41	28	100
Ensign	3	2	10	20	36	34	100
Walker	4	4	12	32	28	28	100

getting along on your job?" Table 4 presents the distributions of responses to this question.

The results on this item are essentially similar to those of the previous items measuring human relations skills. Participation on the local level appears to vary with the interest which the stewards are reported to take in their men. If we look at the proportion of members reporting "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of steward interest, we find again that National ranks highest, Walker ranks lowest, while Ensign and Sergeant are about equal. These differences between locals support the inference that such an orientation on the part of stewards is one means by which a union leadership develops membership participation.

Summary and Conclusions

This article has been concerned with certain leadership skills and functions, and with their relationship to member participation and control. The interpretative problem posed by these findings is serious, and deserves explicit mention. Our hypotheses are stated in terms which regard the several aspects of steward behavior as independent variables, and treat member participation as the dependent variable. The research design, however, permits the demonstration of association only, and not of causation. Moreover, alternative interpretations are not wholly implausible. Are the better communications practices of stewards in active locals properly regarded as a cause of this activity, or is it not that the mem-

bers of such locals (active for other reasons) demand and get adequate communications from their steward?

Questions of this order cannot be answered definitively within the limits of this study. Some light can be shed on this problem, however. Our interpretation receives corroboration, first of all, from the clustering of activity around certain stewards within each of the four locals. Analysis of variance indicates a highly significant conformance of activity level along departmental lines in each plant. That this is attributable in part to differences among the stewards who serve these departments seems reasonable. The congruence of findings among the four locals and within each local gives further support to the interpretation which we have proposed. Those locals in which the four steward practices described are most prevalent are most active, and within each local stewards who offer such leadership have the more active shops. Since the locals themselves were selected for rough comparability in age, community, recent labor-management history, ethnic characteristics, and other essentials, and since the assignment of workers to departments in each plant certainly is accomplished without any attempt to create clusters of active union members, the conclusion is reinforced that the level of union activity is determined in large part by the situation as the worker experiences it. It is hard to doubt that the steward has a major share in defining this situation.

Through his role as grievance processor, decision maker, and communicator, the steward appears to be an important instrumentality for the promotion or the weakening of union democracy. He may or may not help keep the men informed, involve them in certain decisions, work for the achievement of their goals, and offer them a supportive relationship. Insofar as he performs these functions effectively, our data argue that he is stimulating member participation and contributing to membership control in local affairs.

The differences among the four locals illustrating the relationship between the human relations skills on the part of

TABLE 5

Rank Order of Locals on Membership Control, Participation and the Practice of Human Relations Skills on the Part of Stewards

Local	Rank Order						
	Membership control	Participation	Steward informs members	Steward helps men	Steward takes interest	Steward asks men to help decide	Summary human relations skills
National	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Ensign	2	3	2	2	2	3	2
Sergeant	3	2	3	3	3	2	3
Walker	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

stewards and membership control and participation are summarized in Table 5.

Member participation in a union does not just grow; it must be cultivated. It must be desired by the membership and fostered by the leaders. The results of the present study suggest that high membership control appears to exist where leaders such as the stewards are aware and responsive to the members' needs and problems. Stewards in locals where membership control is high appear to have taken on added responsibilities and to give serious weight to their "supervisory" role in the union. They are stewards not only in the formal sense of the word, but they take on some of the functions of consultants, communicators, and mentors. They interact with their men over and beyond the formal requirements of their role. They let their men know what is going on and in turn obtain the opinions of their men on union matters. They appear to value their men as individuals. It seems likely that these skills and behaviors are among the causes of member participation.

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Appendix

For those interested in the methodology of this study of labor unions, we have included in this appendix the following material:

- A. The measures of participation
- B. Evidence on the significance of differences in participation among locals
- C. Data on actual, weighted, and effective N 's
- D. Chi-square and p values for Tables 1-4.

A. The measures of participation

Participation has been measured in terms of an index composed of six items:

1. The number of regular union meetings attended
 2. The number of special union meetings attended
 3. Behavior at meetings
 4. The playing of officer roles
 5. Membership on union committees
 6. Voting behavior during the last union election for officers.
1. Most locals hold regularly scheduled meetings for all members, or for all people who work on the same shift. About how many of these regular meetings have you attended during the last year?
 _____ meetings
 (Coded in terms of the number of meetings attended)
 2. About how many special local meetings have you attended this last year?
 _____ meetings
 (Coded in terms of the number of meetings attended)

3. What things do you usually do at meetings? (*Check as many as apply*)
- Sit and listen
 - Ask questions
 - Bring up grievances
 - Make motions
 - Second motions
 - Answer questions that other people bring up
 - Talk about something being discussed
 - Something else (Please write it in the following space)
- (Coded in terms of the number of items checked exclusive of "sit and listen" and "something else")

4. Are you now a steward or other officer in this local? (Check one)

- Yes
- No

If yes, please list here the positions you now hold.

Name of Position

(Coded in terms of the number of positions held—maximum 3)

5. Are you now on any union committees? (Check one)

- Yes
- No

If yes, please list them here.

Name of Committee

(Coded in terms of the number of committees—maximum 3)

6. Did you vote in the last union election for officers? (Check one)

___ Yes

___ No

(Codes: Yes 1, No 0)

B. Differences in participation among locals.

Due to the different number of meetings held in each local during the course of the year, the maximum participation score possible is different for each local. It is interesting to note, however, that in Walker the maximum score possible is greater than that in any of the other locals. (The other 3 locals are nearly equal in their "potential" scores.) Thus the low level of participation attributed to Walker by our index is not an artifact of the scale. If we had used an index based on the ratio of actual to potential participation, Walker would be recorded as even lower.

The rankings of the four locals are based on the mean scores for each local. In testing the significance of the differences among these locals the "median test" was applied as follows.* A single median score was computed through combining all of the scores in all locals. Then the number of scores *above* and the number of scores *below* this grand median are computed for each local. A chi-square applied to this configuration tests the null hypothesis that the scores in the four locals come from the same population. Table A presents the number of scores in each local which fall above or below the grand median. A chi-square applied to this table is significant beyond the .01 level.

TABLE A

	Walker	Ensign	Sergeant	National
Below Group Median.....	109	80	98	60
Above Group Median.....	49	71	109	137

* This is a non-parametric test summarized by Smith, Keith. *Distribution-Free Statistical Methods and the Concept of Power Efficiency*. In Festinger, Leon and Katz, Daniel (Eds.), *Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Dryden Press, 1953. Pp. 536-577.

C. Actual, weighted, and effective N 's

The actual number of completed questionnaires obtained from each of the four local unions in this study is given below, followed in each case by the percentage which that number represents in relation to the total number of persons designated for interview in each local:

	No. of completed questionnaires	Percentage of total sample obtained
Walker.....	163	91
Ensign.....	169	92
Sergeant.....	223	88
National.....	206	90

The respondents within each local were selected in the following fashion. Before any selections were made, the president and officers of each local were asked to identify each member of the local as "active" or "inactive." In each local a substantially larger number of members were designated inactive. From the resulting strata of active members, all were designated for inclusion in the sample. From the inactive strata, members were sampled on a systematic random basis, using the following ratios: Ensign and Walker—1 in 3; National—1 in 6; Sergeant—1 in 7. These ratios were chosen to yield approximately equal numbers of active and inactive members, in order to maximize the efficiency of comparisons between these two groups.

For purposes of making comparisons between locals, it is necessary to weight responses according to the sampling ratio just specified. The weighted distributions follow.

	Active	Inactive
Walker.....	77	307
Ensign.....	87	288
Sergeant.....	150	735
National.....	139	541

These weighted distributions are based on the entire sample designated for response. As already indicated, data were actually obtained from about 90 percent of this sample.

For conducting statistical tests of significance it is necessary to take account of the fact that the number of cases drawn for the sample from each of the two strata (active and inactive members) was not proportional to the size of the stratum. For this reason, the sample for each local is less efficient in representing the local population than a simple random sample would have been. We have therefore computed an "effective N " for each local, based on the following formula:

$$N_{\text{effective}} = \frac{n_i^2}{k^2 n_2 + n_1}, \text{ assuming the variance of each of the strata is equal to the total variance}$$

n_1 = unweighted number of questionnaires from the stratum sampled at the larger rate (active members)

n_2 = unweighted number of questionnaires from the stratum sampled at the smaller rate (inactive members)

k = ratio of sampling rates for the two strata

n_t = kn_2 plus n_1 = weighted total

(This formula was supplied by Leslie Kish, Head, Sampling Section, Survey Research Center)

In the analysis of each question, the effective N 's were further reduced to correct for people who did not answer the question or for whom the question was inappropriate. For no question, however, did the effective N in any local fall below 100 nor above 175. Accordingly, tests of significance cited in this article were based on the very conservative assumption of an effective N of 100 in all four locals and for all questions.

D. Chi-square and p values for Tables 1-4

Having demonstrated that the four locals are significantly different in the amount of member participation, it remains to be seen whether they are different also in the distributions

presented in Tables 1-4. Chi-square tests were computed to make this determination, with the following results:

Table 1, Reported Communications Practices of Stewards,
 $p < .005$

$$\chi^2 = 31.54 \quad \text{Degrees of freedom} = 9$$

Table 2, Reported Practices of Stewards in Involving Members in Decision Making, $p < .025$

$$\chi^2 = 20.43 \quad \text{Degrees of freedom} = 9$$

Table 3, Reported Assistance from Stewards, $p < .005$

$$\chi^2 = 18.55 \quad \text{Degrees of freedom} = 6$$

Table 4, Reported Interest of Stewards in Members on the Job, $p < .005$

$$\chi^2 = 18.55 \quad \text{Degrees of freedom} = 6$$