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The Commander and Individual Behavior

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One of the explanations that has been postulated to explain individual differences in human behavior is the role theory. In this article the author examines this theory and then, through several examples, illustrates how it applies to the decisions that must be made by the commanding officer.

THE COMMANDER
AND
INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

A lecture delivered at the Naval War College

by

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It is a universally observed phenomenon that one man assigned the exact same job in the same organization will perform differently than another. Further, the same man may perform differently today than he did yesterday with no apparent change at all in his assignments or the conditions under which they are to be accomplished. Few will dispute that this phenomenon occurs. It does, however, cause some problems for any organization, including a military one, which relics to some degree for both its survival and success on the conformity and predictability of its members' performance. Unpredictable behavior occurs in the actions of the commander or skipper himself as well as in that of the seniors, juniors, and contemporaries with whom he deals.

It is important, first of all, to establish a theoretical explanation of why we are exposed to continuing behavioral differences in people. The specific theory I want to adopt for the purpose of this discussion is called the "role theory" of individual performance in organizations.[*] Using this theoretical model I will seek to examine two hypothetical cases of individual behavior differences in the military environment. Following this, I shall suggest some available tools to cope with the role conflicts which often occur in such situations.

In order that we may have a collective understanding of the language, there are several terms that should be defined. A "role" is an organizationally defined position. We can think of commanding officer as a "role," not any particular commanding officer, but the

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[*]For a detailed explanation of role theory see Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1966), chap. 7; or Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), chap. 6.

position itself. The man who is in the "role," we shall call the "focal person." Others within or outside of the organization who interact with the "focal person" in this particular "role" we shall call "role senders" for reasons that will become clear as we proceed.

With this background, let us examine the role of the student at the Naval War College, with one of the current students being the focal person. In this case I have selected the role sender as a military faculty adviser. Hopefully we can now examine how these people interact in terms of role theory.

The role sender has certain expectations. He expects the student to be at school; he expects him to attend classes; he expects him to work on and complete a research project. He "sends" these requirements in some manner to the student, our focal person. Either he states them orally, sends notes, or he relies upon organizational vehicles such as schedules and syllabi to transmit his expectations. The student, in turn, perceives them. On the basis of what he perceives, he adapts his behavior to the faculty adviser's expectations. This does not necessarily mean the one does exactly what the other expects; merely that he makes some adaptation in his behavior. The faculty adviser notes these changes and makes a comparison as to how the focal person behaves to what he, the role sender, expects. This is the basic model.

This system is uncomplicated; there are no conflicts; the focal person performs exactly the desired behavior expected by the role sender who notes it, finds it satisfactory, and approves of the result.

Of course, we seldom have such a stable system. There are always complicating factors which are basically of four kinds. *Organizational influence* of some kind affects both people; one or both may be affected by *personal factors* or *interpersonal factors*; and finally

there may be a *communication problem.*

Taking them in order, what organizational influences might be relevant? We might have a series of schedule changes which have caused our focal person to miss a couple of lectures through sheer confusion. Now the schedule changes have not particularly bothered the role sender since he never intended to attend the lectures anyway. He may not even be aware of the schedule changes at all. But when he learns that the student missed lectures "A7" and "Q17," he concludes that the focal person has not behaved in conformance with his expectations. The role sender may react in a number of ways. He may change his expectations; he may send them again more strongly; or he may interact directly with the focal person to find out what happened. In any case, our system is no longer stable. The role sender's expectations do not coincide with the focal person's behavior. To put it another way, the role sender was not able to *predict* the focal person's performance.

How about personal factors? How may they affect this system? If, for instance, the student was never particularly enamored with the idea of coming here, but by the infinite wisdom of a BuPers detailer was ordered in anyway, his behavior in the student role may be radically different than the role sender expects. The focal person, in this case, might be interested in nothing more than putting in his 10 months' time as painlessly as possible, which may mean missing a class or two on a good golfing day. Again, a mismatch between what the role sender expects and what the focal person does may occur; the stable system is again upset.

In the area of interpersonal factors, we might hypothesize the following situation. Upon first meeting, our role sender adviser and our focal person student have a personal clash of some sort. Perhaps it has nothing to do with

the particular relationship we are examining, but nevertheless the student is alienated and harbors resentment. He then determines to avoid doing anything he perceives the faculty adviser wants. Thus, the stronger and clearer the sender's expectations are sent, the more nonconforming the behavior of the focal person becomes.

Lastly, even with no problems resulting from personal, interpersonal, or organizational conflicts, we can witness loss of stability in this system caused by communication problems between the sender and the focal person. In this regard there are three possible points of distortion in our model. First, the role sender may imperfectly translate his expectations into messages. If he really expects the student to attend each and every class faithfully, does a mere class schedule convey this idea? Perhaps not.

Secondly, what is sent by the role sender may be distorted by the focal person during reception. This is particularly common when the sender is trying to pass on expectations of improved behavior over what has been observed thus far. If the sender says, with a little wry smile, "I noticed you were missing from yesterday's seminar," he may mean, "Don't do it again!" But the focal person may receive it as, "I think you were smart, it wasn't any good anyway." This kind of communication problem can raise more havoc with the stability of the system than anything else, especially when, as is often the case, neither the sender nor the focal person are aware that this en route distortion has taken place.

The third point of communication distortion will occur within the focal person himself in choosing a behavior appropriate to what he has received, perhaps quite accurately, as an expectation. Suppose, for instance, the adviser indicates quite clearly to the student that his written reports for a given seminar need improvement. Suppose also that the student understands this

and accepts it. Now he decides that appropriate behavior is longer reports—more pages. The sender, on the other hand, expects better quality and, if anything, fewer pages. Stability is lost again.

Up to this point we have restricted our model, quite unrealistically, to one role sender. We still get a number of possible variations in the achievement of the ultimate goal of this whole system - acceptable behavior of the focal person in the role of student. Now we complicate it by adding more role senders. There are obviously more in the real world. Our focal person's fellow students, for instance, are certainly role senders in this scheme. They expect him to act more or less like they do, agreeing with their gripes, passing on to them information that he may have and they may need, and doing or not doing a variety of other tasks. The security officer is a role sender he expects our focal person to keep classified material safeguarded. The duty officer is a role sender—he expects the student to sign that checkout sheet on his door when he leaves. There are a very large number of role senders to the student in this one single role.

Now let us go back to the point where none of the complicating organizational or other factors have had an effect; let us consider a situation with one role sender in addition to the faculty adviser. In our single role sender environment, the one we established with the adviser, let us assume a stable system: the behavior of the student exactly matches the expectations of the adviser. Enter into the model a second role sender, a civilian, graduate program professor. This new sender makes it clear that by the end of next week he expects a 10-page paper on the Spiro Agnew-Chet Huntley debates. Our focal person receives this clearly, and has all intentions of behaving accordingly, that is, doing the necessary reading and writing the paper. But he has also

received from the faculty adviser a seminar requirement for the development of a staff study, also due next week. This expectation he has also received very clearly, and he expects to comply with it—until he figures out he does not have time to do both as well as expected. Here we have what is called "role conflict." There are a number of factors that will influence what the student will do, but the point is we have two role sender-focal person relationships which by themselves are perfectly stable. Together, though, they bring about a variation in the behavior of the focal person. If we include all the role senders that have expectations of our focal person in his role as student, even maintaining potentially stable one-to-one relationships, we can verify that the presence of conflict between two or more senders' expectations is going to be the only predictable element in the system.

The problem does not end there, of course. Our focal person is not just a student; he has other roles. He is a husband, a father, naval aviator, maybe a community leader, and a dozen other things. They are all roles that he is filling simultaneously. Our focal person, in other words, at any given point in time is not only filling one role, but many, each with its own separate set of role senders. The number and combinations of possible interrole conflicts in such an environment are probably infinite, even if we postulate no conflicts within a given role. Further, it is unrealistic to assume, as many do, that we can somehow turn roles on and off at our convenience. We cannot say, "Okay, these 8 hours you are in a student role and no longer in the husband role." If the husband role caused the student some problems recently, it will inevitably have an effect on his performance in the student role, regardless of any attempt to ignore it.

Well, the end result of this great, intricate, dynamic system with any one person filling several roles simultaneously, each of which has the capability and high probability of generating conflict, is great variation in a person's response and a certain unpredictability of performance any time we have a human being involved. It is, in fact, amazing that we get any predictability at all. We will not further complicate this model. The key conclusion of the theory for our purposes is that much of what we classify as individual differences in behavior stems not from basic personality characteristics but from ever-changing conflict situations generated largely from outside the man himself.

Now let us examine the job of military commander, the role of the commanding officer, and see if we can't find some common, everyday occurrences of role conflict. Article 0701, *Navy Regulations,* says, in part, the following about the commanding officer: "The responsibility of the commanding officer for his command is absolute. . . . The authority of the commanding officer is commensurate with his responsibility." Apparently, then, his authority is also absolute. But, in article 0202A of the same regulations it goes on to say this: "All commanding officers and others in authority in the naval service are required to show in themselves a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and *subordination.*"* We have here the seeds of conflicting expectations from the same role sender, the Navy Department, on the focal person, the commanding officer. Article 0701 says, "You've got it Charley. You do everything you have to do." But 0702A adds parenthetically, "Be sure you do what you're told." Of course, as long as what he is told to do does not conflict with what he would do anyway, there is no problem. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

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*Emphasis supplied.

Imagine, as a hypothetical example, a carrier task group at sea with a CVA and several destroyers. These ships are transiting from the East Coast to the Med at a speed of 15 knots on a dark and foggy night. Visibility is only a few hundred yards. One of the destroyer captains in the van of the screen begins to get seriously concerned about his speed. There just might be a small vessel out there that will not be seen until too late. At about this point, while he is considering the safety problem, the OTC signals a speed change to 25 knots. His best judgment tells him to slow down in the interests of prudence, not speed up. In fact, article 0701 gives him both the responsibility and the authority to do just that. On the other hand, 0702A says he is to carry out orders, and, further, he happens to know that the Admiral over on the carrier takes a dim view of excessive caution. The potential, unfavorable effect on his fitness report is all too clear in his mind. Still, if he executes the speed signal without objecting and does happen to collide with another vessel, it is article 0701 that the Navy will remember, and he will be the one who gets the ax.

The result of all this is that his behavior is not predictable in this situation. Nor will his behavior necessarily coincide with that of the other skippers. Each captain has been presented with a conflict which he will resolve somehow. One man may tell the admiral he considers it unsafe and refuse to speed up. Another may tell him he considers it unsafe, but he will execute it if ordered to do so. Still a third may just speed up without comment. The important thing to note here is not whether one course of action is right or wrong but that the DD skippers' actions are not predictable. If some plan of the Admiral's, unknown to them, depends upon the signaled speed being executed by all units, the Admiral now has problems that he did not anticipate. But he could have anticipated them had he been

aware of the role conflict inherent in this situation.

Let us examine a second case. The ship is in port for a couple of weeks in preparation for a major gunnery exercise. The commanding officer makes it rather clear to the weapons officer that he expects a 4.0 performance of all his systems during the coming exercise—fire control, computers, guns, the whole works—and that he expects the weapons officer to take all necessary precautions and steps to ensure this happens. Then, as is his habit, the commanding officer spends most of the next 2 weeks away from the ship, leaving in-port care and housekeeping matters to the XO. Unknown to the commanding officer, the XO sends, also rather clearly, to the weapons officer his expectations that all of his topside spaces will be taken down and painted before the ship goes to sea again. This, of course, is consistent with the captain's standing expectations as role sender to the XO as focal person. The weapons officer, however, faced with limited manpower and hours, now has a problem. Complicating it, he has role expectations emanating from his enlisted people as senders that they will get some time off the ship during this brief in-port period. He can resolve this conflict in several ways.

He may let the deck work slip or accept sloppy work in this area in order to devote his primary effort to readying the weapons systems. Or he may just do enough on the weapons systems to make them operable and go to town on the deck areas to keep the XO happy. Or he may try and do both, working his department almost around the clock, figuring, probably foolishly, that he can ignore his subordinates' liberty expectations without serious repercussions. No matter what choice he makes, some senders are going to observe behavior on his part inconsistent with their expectations; and they will react somewhat unpredictably to that, setting off a whole chain of unpredictable reactions

throughout the organization, all stemming from this initial role conflict in which the weapons officer found himself.

There are any number of other examples we could explore, but these two serve to illustrate the point. Role conflict is a fact of life leading to a certain amount of unpredictability in individual behavior. Now how can a commanding officer cope with these variations?

The first requirement is to be aware of this all-pervasive characteristic of conflict. If he predicates his planning on exact conforming behavior of other humans in his organization, of everybody carrying out his orders to the letter (and what he *meant*, not necessarily just what he *said*), he is in for disappointment. His planning must be flexible enough to allow for variability in human behavior, because it is going to occur.

Secondly, he can take efforts to resolve conflicts when he discovers them, particularly when dealing with subordinates. In our second case, he might have relaxed his standing expectations of 4.0 smartness to his XO for this particular in-port period. Or if he felt that this was all important, he might have told the weapons officer that operability of his equipment above some bare minimum was satisfactory for this operation. Or if he thought both were necessary, he might have sent *his* expectations to the crew of the ship of the necessity for long working hours during this period. In any event, the commanding officer, regarding his own units, has a unique advantage in such conflict resolutions. Because of his position, his expectations are liable to receive more emphasis than those of anyone else. Moreover, if he fails to resolve the conflict, someone below him will. But if he takes steps to resolve it, he can reduce somewhat the unpredictability of the human behavior in the system.

How to deal with the problem when he is the junior man such as in the first example is obviously not so clear. The burden there belongs on the senior generating the conflict to resolve it. But there is no way for the commanding officer to ensure that this is attempted. He can, however, be sure that the existence of conflict in a given instance is known, for he can report it. In some cases that will perhaps be enough. The senior generating conflict must realize that he is contributing to the unpredictability in behavior of the entire sytem before any improvement can be expected.

In summary, we have looked at one view, the role theory view, of explaining why human beings in organizations do not behave predictably. What I have tried to show is that some of the primary determinants are not inherent in the man but evolve from what I have described as role conflicts. The reason Seaman Jones is a lousy worker may not be that he is basically a bum, has always been a bum, and always will be one. The cause just might be found in role conflict, something that can be corrected without sending Jones to the brig. If it is, and we take pains to resolve or reduce this conflict, it will be cheaper and less painful for all parties involved. It might even lead to improved performance.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Lt. Comdr. Quentin S. Meeker, U.S. Navy, is presently assigned to the faculty of the School of Naval Command and Staff. He did his undergraduate work at Wesleyan University in German and attended the German War College in Hamburg in 1964. He holds a master's degree in management from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey and he is presently completing the requirements for a doctorate at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.