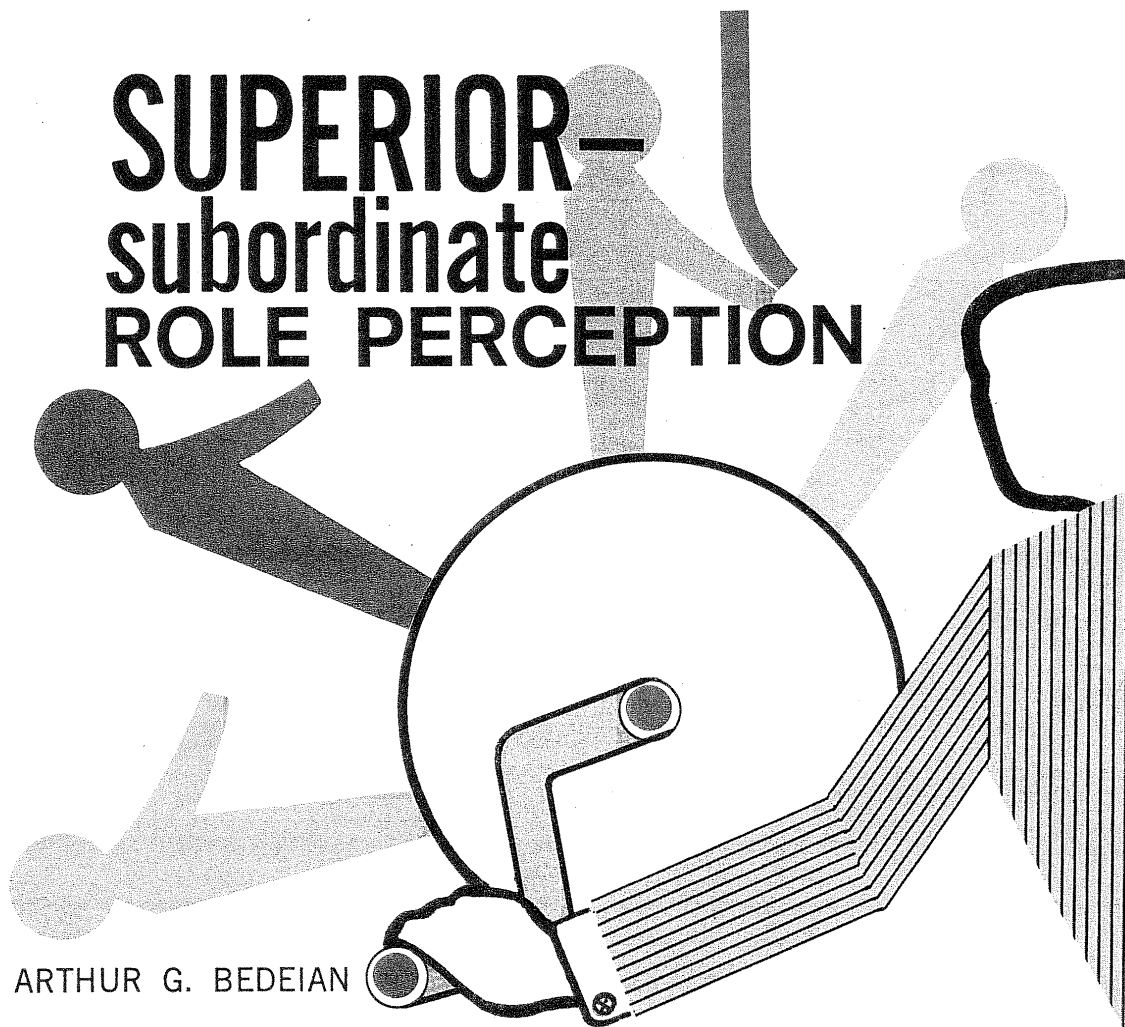


# SUPERIOR— subordinate ROLE PERCEPTION



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Increased awareness by superiors and subordinates of their own self-perceptions can provide both with an accurate basis to re-evaluate present role patterns.

The study of roles is one of the most complex areas in the study of human behavior.

The role of an individual in a social group "is the pattern of actions expected of a person in his activities involving others."<sup>1</sup>

The "pattern of actions" which constitutes a role is "influenced by the individual's knowledge of the role, his motivation to perform the role, his attitudes toward himself and the other persons in the interpersonal behavior event."<sup>2</sup> Since all individuals possess unique motivations, attitudes, and interpersonal response traits, it

follows that the individual performance of various roles is equally unique.

Each person performs in many roles, and each role requires a different behavior pattern. In reference to the industrial setting, a person may be a union member, a tool and die maker, a fellow worker, and a subordinate all at the same time. Each role demands that certain "role expectations" be fulfilled.

Superior-subordinate relationships are at the heart of effective management action. The manager is perceived, and his actions

are interpreted hundreds of times each day by his subordinates. He in turn perceives his subordinates and judges their behavior. This perceiving is rarely deliberate and is for the most part unconscious. It, however, creates the human atmosphere in which the superior and subordinate relate, and it is vital to the continuing success of their relationship.

Perception can be defined as the "complex process by which people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world."<sup>3</sup> Its determinants are: (1) past experience and (2) such factors in the person as needs, emotions, values, and attitudes. Perceptions are by definition selectively organized and may be adapted to the views of the individual perceiver.

### **The Importance of Proper Role Perception**

Ineffective superior-subordinate, interpersonal relationships are often caused by inaccurate role perception.<sup>4</sup> Such inaccuracy is caused by the failure of either the superior or the subordinate, or both, to perceive the three interacting roles of their relationship.

First, each must perceive the role required by his position.

Second, each must perceive the role of the other.

Third, each must perceive his role as seen by the other.

When role perceptions are faulty because of either poor communication or role ambiguity, it is impossible for either the superior or the subordinate to fulfill the "role expectations" of the other.<sup>5</sup> The degree of discrepancy existing between these "role expectations" is in effect an operational

definition of "perceived role ambiguity."

Why such ambiguity exists has been the subject of much research. Bruner explains it in terms of "perceptual readiness."<sup>6</sup> Carl Rogers explains it in terms of differing "frames of reference." He advances the proposition that "every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center."<sup>7</sup> The individual reacts to this changing world as it is perceived; it becomes his own personal "reality."

Upon the basis of Rogers' work, it is increasingly clear why role ambiguity occurs. Because all individuals possess different perceptions, they also perceive different "realities." In the area of interpersonal relationships, the perception of one person by another is influenced by individualized, unique "visions" of reality. Superiors do not perceive their subordinates with total objectivity, nor do subordinates view their superiors with complete neutrality. Perceptions are highly personalized and thus provide bases for potential conflict.

### **Hierarchical Conflict**

The very fact that the superior-subordinate relationship inherently involves different hierarchical positions is in itself a source of potential conflict. Persons holding different positions in an organization are motivated in different ways. They each have their unique sources of information and receive differing degrees of need fulfillment.

This is verified by a study performed by Lyman Porter. Porter investigated the perceived need fulfillment of nearly 2,000 managerial positions. He used a basic five-level need-hierarchy similar to that proposed by Maslow.<sup>8</sup> Porter found that the level of fulfillment for the three highest-order needs (self-actualization, autonomy, and esteem) were greatest at the upper levels of management. Only in the two lower-order needs (security and social) was there found to be no relationship between management level and need satisfaction.<sup>9</sup>

In brief, satisfaction and need fulfillment, by definition, affect motivation. Motivation

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affects behavior, and this in turn greatly influences how a person perceives the world. Motivationally unbalanced situations lead to perceptual variances, and perceptual variances lead to conflict.

### Superior-Subordinate Perceptual Differences

Performing research in the area of role perception as a function of hierarchical level, Nancy Morse of the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan has made a number of interesting findings. These findings verify the existence of superior-subordinate perceptual differences. She studied a group of sixty-one supervisors and 742 clerical employees and delved into the comparative perceptions of each group. In comparing specific attitudes, Morse asked the clerical workers and their supervisors, "How does a person get ahead here in the company?" Supervisors most often answered in regard to "merit," while their workers responded in terms of "knowing the right people or luck."<sup>10</sup>

Similar research performed by Alpander also verifies the perceptual differences existing between superiors and their subordinates regarding their interpretation of each other's work (role).<sup>11</sup> Forty-five subordinates (first-line supervisors) and their im-

mediate superiors were asked to evaluate the "degree of importance" and "degree of effectiveness" of ten job-related functions performed by each of the subordinates. All functions were rated on a scale from 0 to 15.

The results are shown in Table 1. In all but three areas ("dealing with contingencies," "planning the use of labor," and "acting as a communication link") the immediate superiors attributed less importance to each of the functions than did their subordinates. The greatest absolute difference in perception was found in the area of "performing operative functions." Apparently, the first-line supervisors attached much more importance to this area than did their superiors.

With respect to "degree of effectiveness," it is interesting to note that the subordinates overestimated their degree of effectiveness, as compared with their superiors' estimates in all but one area—"checking machinery." Such a discrepancy in degree of effectiveness presents a very real conflict area. Thus, it is implied that almost no matter what the subordinate does to improve his performance (effectiveness), he will not achieve acceptable results because his efforts will be directed in the wrong areas.

**TABLE 1**  
SUPERVISORY ROLE AND PERFORMANCE EFFECTIVENESS  
(Prior to Training)

Function	Degree of Importance			Degree of Effectiveness		
	(Maximum Score 15)			(Maximum Score 15)		
	Rating by supervisor	Rating by his immediate superior	Perceptual difference (absolute #)	Rating by supervisor	Rating by his immediate superior	Perceptual difference (absolute #)
Checking production	13.4	11.0	2.4	12.7	9.6	3.1
Dealing with contingencies	9.6	12.4	2.8	13.0	10.2	2.8
Reporting back to superior	13.4	12.4	1.0	12.7	9.0	3.7
Planning use of labor	11.0	13.0	2.0	13.0	7.7	5.3
Routine distribution & transfer of work	11.5	10.2	1.3	13.5	9.0	4.5
Checking the product	9.5	8.0	1.5	12.5	9.0	3.5
Checking machinery	10.6	9.0	1.6	9.0	9.0	0.0
Supervising operative employees	13.0	12.6	.4	12.2	10.2	2.0
Acting as a communication link	12.4	14.0	1.6	12.5	9.6	2.9
Performing operative functions	14.7	10.0	4.7	12.5	9.0	3.5
Average			1.93			3.13

Source: Alpander, Guvenc G., "Closing the Supervisor/Superior Gap." *California Management Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, Fall, 1970, p. 87.

Additional verification of the conclusions drawn from the work of Alpander is provided by the work of Samuel A. Stouffer and his associates in their massive study concerning all phases of World War II army life. While the conditions surrounding their findings were certainly different from those usually found in the industrial world, similar relevant indications are clear. Stouffer et al. found that out of fifty-three company commanders, forty-three overestimated their subordinates' "satisfaction with their jobs," their "desire to be a soldier," their

employees in your work group?" The reverse of this question was asked of each employee, that is, "How does your supervisor give recognition for good work done by employees in your work group?"

The results are shown in Table 2. Differences noticeably exist in all areas. Special attention is drawn to the perceptual discrepancies that exist in the areas of "trains for better jobs" and "gives more interesting work." Combining these findings with those of Porter, it is no mystery why need fulfillment in the areas of self-actuali-

**TABLE 2**  
COMPARISON OF SUPERVISORS' DESCRIPTION OF THEIR BEHAVIOR  
WITH EMPLOYEES' DESCRIPTION OF THEIR EXPERIENCE.

	Asked of supervisors: "How do you give recognition for good work done by employees in your work group?"	Asked of employees: "How does your supervisor give recognition for good work done by employees in your work group?"
	Frequency with which supervisors say "very often":	Frequency with which employees say "very often":
"Gives privileges"	52%	14%
"Gives more responsibility"	48%	10%
"Gives a pat on the back"	82%	13%
"Gives sincere and thorough praise"	80%	14%
"Trains for better jobs"	64%	9%
"Gives more interesting work"	51%	5%

Source: Mann, F. G., *A Study of Work Satisfaction As A Function of the Discrepancy Between Inferred Aspirations and Achievement*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1953, reported in Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961, p. 91.

"pride in their outfit," and the "importance which they attached to the infantry."<sup>12</sup>

In seeking an explanation for this, the study concludes that "psychologically, one of the elements in this habit of officers of overestimating their men's favorable attitudes was a product of the tendency to project one's own attitudes upon the men."<sup>13</sup> The actual degree of such projection is not discernible from the data supplied, but such a situation could easily have its counterpart in industry.

Working in an area very similar to Stouffer, Mann investigated the self-perceived behavior of a number of supervisors as compared to that perceived by their subordinates.<sup>14</sup> His findings support the belief that perceptual differences exist in both "frames of reference." For example, he asked each supervisor, "How do you give recognition for good work done by em-

ployees in your work group?" The reverse of this question was asked of each employee, that is, "How does your supervisor give recognition for good work done by employees in your work group?"

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A study by Kahn even further stresses the basis behind the misperceived relationship that exists between superior and subordinate.<sup>15</sup> It deals with the area of "factors rated of major importance on the job." Kahn's study reports the findings of two questions asked at three levels of management. Foremen and general foremen were asked both of the following questions, and workmen were asked only the first:

1. Different people want different things out of a job. What are the things you yourself feel are most important in a job?
2. Different people want different things out of a job. What are the things you think most people you supervise feel are most important in a job?<sup>16</sup>

The results are summarized in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**WHAT SUBORDINATES WANT IN A JOB, COMPARED WITH THEIR SUPERIORS' ESTIMATES.\*\***

	AS MEN	AS FOREMEN		AS GENERAL FOREMEN	
	Rated the variables for themselves	Estimated men would rate the variables	Rated the variables for themselves	Estimated foremen would rate the variables	Rated the variables for themselves
<b>Economic variables:</b>					
Steady work and steady wages	61% 28 ✓	79% 61	62% 17	86% 58	52% 11
Pensions and other old-age-security benefits	13	17	12	29	15
Not having to work too hard	13	30	4	25	2
<b>Human-satisfaction variables:</b>					
Getting along well with the people I work with	36% 28	17% 14	39% 28	22% 15	43% 24
Getting along well with my supervisor					
Good chance to turn out good-quality work	16	11	18	13	27
Good chance to do interesting work	22	12	38	14	43
<b>Other variables:</b>					
Good chance for promotion	25%	23%	42%	24%	47%
Good physical working conditions	21	19	18	4	11
Total	*	*	*	*	*
Number of cases	2,499	196	196	45	45

\*Percentages total over 100 because they include three rankings for each person

\*\*Data taken from approximately 4,000 workers and supervisors in a company manufacturing household appliances in the midwestern United States

Source: Kahn, Robert L., "Human Relations on the Shop Floor," in *Human Relations and Modern Management*, ed. by E. M. Hugh-Jones. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1959, p. 49.

The first significant perceptual difference occurs in the area of "high wages." Sixty-one per cent of the foremen expected their workmen to rate wages of major importance; however, only twenty-eight per cent of them actually did. Likewise, fifty-eight per cent of the general foremen felt the foremen under them would react in the same way. Only seventeen per cent of the foremen actually did. This same pattern is repeated for "pensions and other old age security benefits" and "steady work and steady wages."

#### **Supervisors Underperceive Some Factors**

In regard to what Kahn refers to as the "non-monetary" and "social-psychological factors," foremen and general foremen each *under-perceived* the importance of these factors to their subordinates. Thirty-six per cent of the men felt "getting along well with the people I work with" to be one of the three most important factors listed; however, only seventeen per cent of the foremen believed the men would list it.

Similarly, the general foremen underrated the value of this factor to the foremen. Such differences also existed for the two factors of having a "good chance to turn out good quality work" and having a "good chance to do interesting work."

If the first four factors in Table 3 are interpreted as representing monetary goals, financial security, and non-requirement of hard work, it is found that the foremen greatly overestimated the value of such goals to their men. For these four items, the average difference between the foremen's perceptions of the men and the true responses of the men is eighteen per cent. Conversely, if the second set of four factors is interpreted to represent needs for self-expression and social approval, it is found that the foremen underestimated the importance of these factors to their men by seventeen per cent.

Actual differences between the perceptions of the men and their foremen appear to be rather modest when compared with the differences perceived by the foremen.

A rank order correlation between the foremen's and worker's perceptions in the first and third columns shows a significance at .76. However, there is only a .05 correlation between the foremen's perceptions and their interpreted perception of the men's opinions. Kahn's analysis of this fact is rather enlightening. He states that:

Such misperception may be useful for the foremen, in that it helps them maintain a sense of superiority to those they supervise, but it can hardly be useful for the organization. The organizational effects of management's inability to assess correctly the needs and motives of workers have yet to be traced out in detail. We would expect, however, that such misperceptions would lead inevitably to unintended offenses on the part of supervisors, and to the choice of ineffective devices for motivating employees. Foreman and worker, in such circumstances, fail to communicate in a way which has the intended effect. It becomes impossible to establish a pattern of reciprocal influence and accommodation, and in spite of their physical proximity they become, in Rogers' phrase, two people 'missing each other in psychological space.'<sup>17</sup>

Kahn's remarks summarize quite well many of the conclusions previously set forth in this article. The study conducted by Mann, moreover, verifies the actual existence of implied communication difficulties that would most likely arise in such a situation. Mann's findings regarding numerous parallel questions presented to workers, their foremen, and top staff are summarized in Table 4.

The first line of the table reports that ninety per cent of top staff and eighty-five per cent of the foremen believe that their subordinates "feel very free to discuss important things about the job" with them. In contrast, only sixty-seven per cent of the foremen and fifty-one per cent of the men perceive such an existing relationship.

The second line seems to indicate that top staff and foremen generally feel that they "always or nearly always tell subordinates in advance about changes which will affect them or their work." However, this belief does not seem to be shared by their subordinates.

The third line of the table offers the greatest perceived differences. While the figures of the table are presented in percentages and no clear indication is given concerning the exact number of respondents in each category, the wide discrepancy between the belief on the foremen's part that they "always or almost always get subordinates' ideas," as contrasted to the percentage of workers who perceive such a relationship as existing is alarming.

### Conclusion

As the research which has been described indicates, there are numerous reasons why superiors and subordinates perceive one another's actions differently. Likert has pointed out that

an individual's reaction to any situation is always a function, not of the absolute character of the interaction, but of his perception

TABLE 4  
EXTENT TO WHICH SUPERIORS AND SUBORDINATES AGREE ON ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THEM.

	% Top staff say about foremen	% Foremen say about themselves	% Foremen say about the men	% Men say about themselves
Feel very free to discuss important things about the job with superior	90	67	85	51
Always or nearly always tell subordinates in advance about changes which will affect them or their work	100	63	92	47
Always or almost always get subordinates' ideas	70	52	73	16

Source: Mann, F. G., *A Study of Work Satisfaction As A Function of the Discrepancy Between Inferred Aspirations and Achievement*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1953, reported in Arnold S. Tannenbaum, *Social Psychology of the Work Organization*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1966, p. 47.

of it. It is how he sees things that counts, not objective reality. Consequently, an individual will always interpret an interaction between himself and the organization in terms of his background and culture, his experience and expectations.<sup>18</sup>

This comment appears to be true for superior-subordinate relationships at any hierarchical level in an organization.

Supervision is a relative process. To be effective and foster understanding, the superior-subordinate relationship must be provided with an awareness of the complexity of the perceptual process. Both the superior and subordinate must be warned not to base judgments on unreliable evidence and to avoid arbitrary, unsupported conclusions about one another. Further, an increased awareness by a superior and his subordinate of their own self-perception can provide both with an accurate basis upon which to re-evaluate their present role patterns. Such methods as joint-target setting, periodic superior-subordinate conferences and other techniques necessitating interpersonal contact should be used to their fullest benefit. While this is certainly not a total solution, it undoubtedly is a beginning to a better understanding of the superior-subordinate interpersonal relationship.

An organization characterized by supervisory and employee attitudes that coincide, will have a much better opportunity to achieve operational success. In the studies that have been reported, it is impossible to say who is "right." It is, however, certain that superiors and their subordinates are not "perceiving" the same situations.

#### **A Possible Course to Follow**

In an attempt to eliminate the sources of perceptual conflict between first-line supervisors and their immediate superiors, a "new" training method is being developed by Professor Guvenc G. Alpander at the University of Maine.<sup>19</sup> While the approach is still in preliminary design stages, initial indications credit it with great success.

Described as a participative type of

training program directed at first-line supervisors, it is divided into two principal parts. The first phase of the approach is designed to determine the training needs of the particular first-line supervisors in question. The second phase involves the actual implementation of a training program structured to meet these needs.

Nine firms cooperated in the pilot research project. They represented a diverse sampling of industry ranging from food processing, shoe manufacturing, pulp and paper to utilities. Forty-five first-line supervisors (approximately five representatives per company) were selected to enter the program.

Each of these selected representatives and their direct superiors were presented with a questionnaire and were asked to evaluate the degree of importance of ten job functions. The results of their evaluation have been commented on earlier and reported in Table 1. By using this information to determine training needs, a ten-week course of instruction was formulated. Each week of the course different areas of management were discussed. These areas included: motivation, communications, planning for change and manpower management. The forms of instructional techniques employed ranged from participant-centered to extremely leader-centered. This combination of authoritarianism and participation is considered to be the most unique point of the training method. A normal class session of the program included free discussion, case problems, and assigned readings. Also, the conference leader related and summarized material that had been presented.

A month and one week after completion of the training program, the participating first-line supervisors were again asked to evaluate the "degree of importance" of the ten functions upon which they were first queried. Table 5 shows the results as compared to the original ratings assigned by the superiors.

In appraising these results, it is evident that the "perceptual gap" between the superiors and subordinates in question de-

creased. In all the functional areas, the absolute difference of disagreement declined. The average measurement of difference fell from 1.93 to 0.91.

On the basis of these results, it seems evident that this training method has (1) provided a means to determine needed areas of training for supervisors, (2) devel-

oped a means to measure perceptual differences, and (3) enabled both the supervisors and their superiors to further appreciate the others' viewpoint.

While these results are still preliminary and as yet by no means indicate long term and permanent change, this work is at least an effort in the right direction.

**TABLE 5**  
THE DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE OF FIRST-LINE SUPERVISORS' FUNCTIONS  
(After the Training Program)

Function	Degree of Importance (Maximum Score 15)		Perceptual difference (absolute #)
	Rated by Subordinates	Rated by Superiors	
Checking production process	12.1	11.0	1.1
Dealing with contingencies	11.4	12.4	1.0
Reporting to his superior	13.0	12.4	0.6
Planning use of labor	12.4	13.0	0.6
Routine distribution and transfer of work	11.0	10.2	0.8
Performing operative functions	12.5	10.0	2.5
Checking the product	9.0	8.0	1.0
Checking machinery	9.6	9.0	0.6
Supervising operative employees	13.0	12.6	0.4
Acting as a communication link	13.5	14.0	0.5
Average			.91

Source: Alpander, Guvenc G., "Closing the Supervisor/Superior Gap." *California Management Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, Fall, 1970, 88.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Keith, *Human Relations at Work: The Dynamics of Organizational Behavior* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Krech, David, Richard S. Crutchfield, and Egerton L. Ballachey, *Individual In Society*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1962, pp. 489-90.

<sup>3</sup>Berelson, Bernard, and Gary A. Steiner, *Human Behavior*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup>Alpander, Guvenc G., "Closing the Supervisor/Superior Gap." *California Management Review*, XIII, No. 1, Fall, 1970, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup>Costello, Timothy W., and Sheldon S. Zalkind, *Psychology in Administration*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Rogers, Carl R., *Client-Centered Therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951, p. 483.

<sup>8</sup>Maslow, A. H., "A Theory of Human Motivation: The Basic Needs." *Psychological Review*, L, 1943, pp. 370-96.

<sup>9</sup>Porter, L. W., "Job Attitudes in Management: I. Perceived Deficiencies in Need Fulfillment as a Function of Job Level." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, XLVI, No. 6, 1962, pp. 375-84.

<sup>10</sup>Morse, Nancy C., *Satisfactions in the White-Collar Job*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1953, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup>Alpander, pp. 84-88.

<sup>12</sup>Stouffer, S., E. A. Suchman, L. C. DeVinney, Shirley A. Star, and R. M. Williams, Jr., *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*, Vol. I, *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1949, pp. 392-93.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>14</sup>Mann, F. G., *A Study of Work Satisfaction As a Function of the Discrepancy Between Inferred Aspirations and Achievement*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1953, reported in Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup>Kahn, Robert L., "Human Relations on the Shop Floor," in *Human Relations and Modern Management*, ed. by E. M. Hugh-Jones. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1959, pp. 42-74.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup>Likert, Rensis, "Motivational Approach to a Modified Theory of Organization and Management," in *Modern Organization Theory*, ed. by Mason Haire. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1959, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup>This "new" training method is reported in "Closing the Supervisor/Superior Gap." *California Management Review*, XIII, No. 1, Fall, 1970, pp. 84-88.