

Welcome to the April 2004 issue of Management Shorts  
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### **I. INTRO: The Surreal Life of a Manager**

Imagine the following scenario: You have started a new job and are excited about the opportunity to make an impact and be a great leader. You know that your performance depends on your team and see your primary job as helping them be successful – you get their input on plans and decisions, share information openly, give them clear goals along with the autonomy to accomplish them, take a sincere interest in their development and career goals, and generally treat them as equals. Despite all your efforts and good intentions, you are seeing a bizarre range of behavior on the team:

- Mary seems incapable of taking any initiative and waits for your instructions;
- Juan walks around with a scowl on his face and challenges everything you say;
- Vivek seems more focused on pleasing you and scoring brownie points than on getting things done;
- Jeanne seems suspicious of you, assigning the worst motives to your every move;
- Taka is behaving like a loose cannon and taking unilateral action on major issues without discussing them with you;
- Chantall is at your door every five minutes to get your opinion;
- And Steve is surprisingly touchy, taking every question and comment from you as a criticism.

All of these people are smart and competent, so what’s going on? Why is there such a big disconnect between your intentions and the behavior of your direct reports?

This month’s Management Short is a look at a rarely discussed dynamic created by the power differential inherent in the boss/subordinate relationship.

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## **II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Power Differentials & “Projection”**

### **A Little Psychobabble**

So what is causing the baffling scenario described above? A number of things may be in the mix, but often a part of the picture is something that psychologists call “projection”. The simplest definition is that projection is a defense mechanism whereby we transfer or “project” our feelings about one person onto another.

### **Bringing Mom and Dad to Work**

When we look at the power differentials that are inherent in any corporate structure, we find a morass of unresolved conflicts and feelings generated in our childhood relationships – often with our parents who, when we were small, had absolute power over us. We unconsciously use our boss to recreate these relationships, often trying to get whatever we wanted most from our parents or others but never (fully) got. For some it is a powerful need for recognition and approval, for others it is a desire to assert our independence.

For example, one of my clients was creating stress in her relationship with her boss by her constant need for feedback and approval. She could see that the behavior wasn’t serving her well, but wasn’t able to control it until she made the conscious connection to her demanding father for whom no accomplishment was good enough.

Although parental projections are particularly powerful, the dynamic can play out in other ways:

- One of my clients was struggling with fully trusting his boss until he realized that the man’s heavy Boston accent was evoking a former colleague who frequently blamed others for his mistakes;
- Another client was able to work more productively with a direct report after recognizing that the direct had a few superficial similarities with an old business partner with whom things had ended badly. He told me, “I’ve been wasting my time replaying old arguments with Fred!”;
- After several years of working for a boss who resisted new ideas by making jokes about them, one manager found himself assuming that a new boss with a similar sense of humor wasn’t interested in creative ideas – an assumption that eventually proved false.
- And haven’t we all had the somewhat creepy experience of replaying the patterns of an old romance in the early stages of dating someone new!

### **In the Grip of Projection**

As the examples above illustrate, projection is a far from rational process. Even when we understand it intellectually, we can still find ourselves “in the grip of projection”. I was reminded of this recently when I was called for jury duty.

Jury selection is a tedious process and the Judge tried to break it up with light-hearted jokes. I usually appreciate attempts at humor, but was surprised by how irritated I was by the Judge. It got worse when it was my turn to be questioned and I experienced the jokes as mean-spirited and made at my expense. I left court that day angry and upset and wondering why I was having such a strong reaction to something so small.

My normal response to such humor is to join in on the banter. Either that or make a friendly request that we get back to business. But because of the absolute power a judge wields in his courtroom, I didn't feel free to do any of that. I felt powerless to respond or object. On reflection it dawned on me that the experience had taken me back to the age of 3 when I lacked the verbal skills to fight back against an older brother who liked to tease and make fun of me. No surprise then that my initial reaction was that of a toddler – lots of emotion and little rational thought. Although its no fun being upset, the real cost in this situation was that I had a very narrow and negative view of the Judge – I interpreted all of his behavior in the worst light, reinforcing my initial negative reaction.

### **The Power of Position**

Few managers have the same level of power as a judge. Most of the managers I work with don't feel particularly powerful at all or "above" the people who work for them (in fact they often feel powerless and dependent on their employees to make them successful). They are surprised to learn that simply by being in a position of formal authority they will attract projections from those below them in the hierarchy. (They are even more surprised to learn that the troubles they are having with their own “difficult” boss may be at least partly a result of what they themselves are projecting.)

This is particularly true when the work relationship is new and the manager and the subordinate don't know each other well. In psychological terms, the unknown boss becomes a blank screen onto which the subordinate (who has good reason to have some anxiety about how well this relationship will serve his or her career) projects whatever issues he or she has with authority figures. In my case I was projecting sibling rivalry on the unsuspecting and, as I would later discover, well-meaning judge.

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### **III. GETTING STARTED: Ask for Feedback**

You don't have to psychoanalyze your employees to address this dynamic. The solution is to both take their reactions to you less personally AND to engage with them more fully in an open dialogue about how your behavior may be impacting them and about what you need from each other.

Just understanding that this dynamic MIGHT be going on can take the sting out of an employee's behavior towards you. Their behavior can feel very personal and may stir up some of your own unconscious childhood stuff that causes you to behave in ways that exacerbate the situation. (I have focused on projection from the employee's side, but it operates in both directions.) If you can step back and hold the possibility that the reaction is not completely about you, then you are more able to stay engaged in a productive manner.

### **Dissolving the Projection Through Interaction & Dialogue**

My experience at the courthouse had a happy ending that left me with a very positive view of the judge. Although the first day had me started in a cycle of reinforcing my initial negative reaction, that cycle was interrupted and reversed. How did this happen? A number of key things happened:

1. After jury selection I sat through the trial and **saw another side** of the judge that was more serious and professional. This new data **expanded my image of him** so that I could start to really see him and not just the image I had projected. (Do you let your directs see the real you or do you consider it important to present a "managerial" persona? The more limited your range, the more likely it is that a projection will persist.)
2. At the end of the trial the judge gave us his e-mail address and made a **sincere request for feedback** from us. That invitation was a key turning point in my willingness to believe the judge might have positive qualities. The e-mail address made it safe and easy to give him feedback. (How often do you invite feedback? Do you show you mean it by scheduling time in your one-on-one's or bringing in an outside consultant to do anonymous interviews?)
3. I took him up on the invitation and wrote an e-mail **giving him feedback on his behavior and how it had impacted me**. (Do you or your people know how to give behavior-specific feedback?)
4. The Judge **responded quickly** and **apologized** for making me feel the way I had. And he did it in a way that seemed sincere, not pro forma. (Often our first instinct is to ignore feedback we don't like or respond defensively and tell the other person why their reaction was wrong. How do you respond?)

5. He **acknowledged** my point that his position as the judge gave him a lot of power that impacted the dynamic in the courtroom. (Can you let the other person know you've heard them, even when you don't fully agree?)
6. He **told me his positive intentions** in making jokes without discounting my reactions. (This is about getting both realities out on the table, not arguing about which one is "right".)
7. He **asked for suggestions** on what he could do differently and **expressed interest** in the particular expertise I brought to the subject. He saw this as an opportunity to be better at his job. (Asking for help like this is one way of lessening the power differential between you and a direct report. It may feel weak but I guarantee it will increase the respect he or she has for you.)

The Judge was so **open to my feedback** and to **taking ownership of his behavior** that I was able to let go of my initial reactions. We exchanged several e-mails that I think we both found helpful. This open dialogue "dissolved" the projection I was carrying around and enabled me to relate to him as the real person he was, not the distorted projection of my childhood sibling (which, by the way, is an internal story, not an accurate version of who my brother is now or was 40 years ago). And on his side he learned about things he was doing that undermined his effectiveness.

### **A Simple Approach**

So after all this psychobabble, we're back to a very basic management practice – asking for feedback. In my case the Judge only had to ask once, but in most organizations people are very cautious about giving feedback. You'll need to ask often, in different ways, and in multiple formats. You may need to provide training on feedback, and you may find it helpful to bring in a third party to do interviews. I'm working with one client now to institutionalize feedback into the organization in a way that keeps working relationships vibrant and productive.

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## **IV. FINAL THOUGHTS: Cultivating Self-Awareness**

It would be easy to start feeling superior to all those poor souls in the grip of projection, but if you are a regular reader of my newsletters you know that I'm about to turn the concept around on you. We all (and that includes YOU) are projecting old relationships onto others, and most of the time we are blissfully unaware of it.

As you think about a current relationship that is frustrating to you, can you see any possibility that your own projections might be distorting the interaction?

Just recognizing what is going on can make the projection much less powerful (as well as making you more empathetic and patient with others).

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This kind of self-reflection is a critical part of your growth and development as a leader. If you are familiar with Daniel Goleman's work on Emotional Intelligence, he lists self-awareness as the first of 5 key components of emotional intelligence for managers.

You can cultivate self-awareness through simple reflection, through asking for feedback, through one-on-one coaching (which I'd be pleased to provide!), and through various leadership development programs. One program that I often recommend to clients is "**Authentic Influencing for High Performance**", developed by the faculty who created the popular course on "Interpersonal Dynamics" at Stanford Graduate School of Business (referred to by students as "Touchy-Feely"). Information on this program is available at: [www.ntl.org/training-public-courseinfo.asp?CourseCntrlNo=118](http://www.ntl.org/training-public-courseinfo.asp?CourseCntrlNo=118)

Until next month . . .

Warm regards,  
Andrea

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About Management Shorts

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**Management Shorts** is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

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