Rapid Relationality: Staff Influence Over Line Members for Soldier Mental Healthcare

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ABSTRACT

Organizations often hire professionals for their unique expertise and legitimacy to accomplish important organizational goals. Yet these professionals are often part of the “staff” or “support” function of the organization and lack formal authority over those on the “line” associated with the organization’s core. Given this power imbalance, those on the line may resist staff professional efforts to elicit cooperation from them with relative impunity. This can prevent organizations from benefiting from the expertise of these staff professionals and lead to failed organizational goals and change efforts. When and how can lower power staff professionals elicit cooperation from higher power line members?

In this paper, I analyze data from a 30-month qualitative field study of staff professionals, in this case U.S. Army mental health professionals, and the line professionals over whom they lacked authority, in this case the direct commanders of the soldiers they treated. Even though the U.S. Army invested significant resources in improving mental health services for soldiers, I found that soldiers could not fully benefit from these extensive services when their commanders overrode the recommendations made by their mental health providers.

Despite these barriers, many providers were able to achieve high levels of influence in which commanders regularly complied with their recommendations. I identify a three-stage process that describes how these mental health professionals elicited regular cooperation from these commanders despite lacking formal authority over them. I refer to this process as “relational shielding.” I also demonstrate the importance of what I call “rapid relationality” whereby providers must go through all three phases of relational shielding quickly, before a series of minor conflicts or a major conflict threatens their budding influence with these commanders. My analysis suggests it is not only what staff professionals do to elicit compliance from those on the line, but also when and how quickly they do it that matters. These findings contribute to our understanding of managing staff-line relations, influence tactics, and temporal dynamics in organizations.