



Exploring the Determinants of Managerial Vulnerability to Manipulation: A Qualitative Investigation



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Abstract: Managerial proficiency, a multifaceted construct, encompasses numerous attributes and is thought to be augmented by experience. Despite the inherent complexities of management roles, susceptibility to manipulation poses a significant challenge to organizational success. The cultural context in which a manager operates may exert either a positive or negative influence on this vulnerability, highlighting the need for comprehensive examination. However, the existing theoretical basis for addressing this issue remains underdeveloped. The present study seeks to identify the areas most susceptible to manipulation, thereby recognizing potential risks for managers and suggesting strategies for mitigation. A qualitative research approach was employed, with semi-structured interviews conducted and subjected to exploratory factor analysis. Findings from this investigation uncovered a multitude of domains in which managers could be misled. The outcomes of this research are expected to provide valuable insights for managerial practitioners and contribute to the broader field of management studies.

Keywords: Management; Manipulation; Success of manager; Decision making

1. Introduction

The objective of successful enterprise management encompasses the coordination of activities for cost reduction, profitability enhancement, and productivity improvement, all of which contribute to enterprise growth. Managerial decision-making processes play a crucial role in achieving this success, as the accuracy of these decisions directly influences the enterprise's performance (Kıral, 2015). This study focuses on the susceptibility of managers to manipulation, a factor that may impair their decision-making capabilities and negatively affect their interactions with employees.

Realism is identified as an essential quality within a managerial profile, contributing significantly to decision-making that is less prone to error. Nonetheless, even with high preparedness and a propensity toward realism, managers remain vulnerable to being misled by employees. This susceptibility is modulated by various variables, including employees' education levels, job satisfaction, organizational structure, flexibility, and the manager's managerial experience. Additionally, the nature of the business sector, social culture, and organizational culture, shaped by this social culture, further impact the degree to which a manager can be misled (Nonaka & Johansson, 1985; Whitley, 1988).

An increase in the frequency of managerial errors and manipulation by employees and other managers directly corresponds to higher failure rates, elevated costs, decision inaccuracies, and inconsistencies in planning and control. Management is viewed as an entity with a social aspect, embodying ethical values such as justice, honesty, impartiality, and responsibility (Kıral, 2015).

Divergent perspectives among managers concerning the profit-loss relationship have been observed, leading to variations in risk-taking behaviors and operations in uncertain and risky environments. The expectancy theory proposes that managers can engage in irrational decision-making (Savaşkan, 2020). A lack of realism in such

irrational decision-making and risk-taking behavior can contribute to a suboptimal view of profit-loss relationships, as well as susceptibility to manipulation by employees and other managers.

Management skills are typically bifurcated into hard and soft skills. Emphasis is often placed on the importance of "soft" skills, such as staff management, style, and superordinate goal factors, in managing successful organizations (Nonaka & Johansson, 1985). Such skills are intricately interdependent and modulated by organizational structures and policies (Whitley, 1988). For example, humanistic skills, which pertain to a project manager's ability to function effectively as a group member and foster cooperation within the team they lead, are influenced by exposure to manipulation (El-Sabaa, 2001). This study aims to shed light on these intricate dynamics, contributing to a deeper understanding of the determinants of successful management.

Managerial challenges often entail decision-making problems, as noted in previous research (Unal & Atılgan, 2007). These problems can escalate if attempted resolution neglects to rely on accurate data, causing further complications for both the manager and the organization. Success is commonly gauged by efficiency metrics, which measure a manager's proximity to set goals and their adeptness in resource utilization (Barutçugil, 2006).

Recent work has underscored that managerial manipulation can elicit adverse consequences, affecting not only corporate culture but also long-term sustainability (Abdeldayem, et al., 2022). A key determinant of a company's economic security is its capacity for innovative development (Tulchynska et al., 2022). It should be noted that innovative growth may be hindered by manipulative management tactics.

Erroneous decisions have the potential to trigger a crisis and may lead to improper responses when faced with such a crisis. If the crisis spirals out of control due to incorrect decisions and activities, and if, according to assessments and projections, the enterprise has no chance of survival in the mid to long term, the possibility of collapse arises (Göral, 2014). Managerial effectiveness and resource utilization proficiency hinge on making correct decisions.

Effective managers should exhibit the ability to handle negative emotions, possess self-awareness of their own emotional states, be observant of the emotions of others, and manage their emotions effectively (Goleman, 1998). However, even managers with these skills could be susceptible to manipulation. The fulfillment of enterprise objectives via effective and efficient use of available resources relies heavily on managerial competencies and organizational knowledge (Ardahan, 2011). Management comes into play wherever human interaction exists and is crucial for the collective benefit and economic stability of any group.

In any situation, a manager is required to succeed, guide the organization towards prosperity, reduce costs, and enhance profitability. For these outcomes, appropriate decision-making is essential, and errors should be minimized as much as possible. Being cognizant of scenarios that could lead managers astray is crucial. This might be due to either the manager's strong personality or the employees' motivation to deceive.

Manipulation is defined as a psychological and social influence that seeks to alter the perception or behavior of others through deceptive or disturbing strategies (Yilmaz, 2018). It is important to recognize that manipulation can be both intentional and unintentional, and can occur in various forms, such as through information withholding, persuasion, or emotional exploitation (Ovacik Coruh, 2019).

A review of existing literature identifies seven dimensions that influence the decision-making process, including the decision-makers, the importance of the decision, environmental conditions, the time factor, available alternatives, constraints, and outcomes. Inadequate and irregular functioning of upper management and their propensity towards failure may be attributed to difficulties in making accurate and timely decisions.

Although the literature reflects the impact of incorrect decisions and various other factors on managerial success, it does not thoroughly examine the factors that lead managers astray. This knowledge gap highlights the need for the present study.

The terms "deception" and "manipulation" are used interchangeably within this study. The adopted methods are delineated in detail, and the findings are qualitatively and verbally categorized and explained. The conclusion and evaluation section interprets these findings and emphasizes potential solutions.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this investigation was designed to isolate specific aspects of managerial behavior vulnerable to manipulation and deception. With the objective of proposing potential solutions to address these identified weaknesses, the research design relied on the interview method. Managerial participants were recruited using a convenience sampling approach, without explicit consideration given to their particular qualifications or demographic attributes. This participant recruitment strategy was selected due to the inherent challenges in securing the time of experienced managers.

Data obtained through interviews were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Initially, the gathered information was simplified, subsequently categorized, and then interpreted. Areas exhibiting the highest frequency of similar responses or emphasized by interviewees were grouped under common headings. Exploratory factor analysis was utilized to elucidate and interpret the findings. Owing to the simplicity of the collected data and the straightforward nature of the sought information, no software was employed for data analysis.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. In addition to the predetermined interview questions, the semi-structured format permitted managers to discuss supplementary topics they deemed relevant to the research. For example, additional questions encompassed inquiries concerning the managers' experience with similar problems, other potential issues from their perspective, and whether other managers might face the same challenges.

The principal questions posed during the interviews were as follows:

Interview Questions

1. What is your industry of operation?
2. What is your managerial role, title, and level?
3. How many individuals report to you?
4. How many years of managerial experience do you have?
5. Can employees mislead managers?
6. If so, in which ways are you most often misled?
7. What advice would you give to new managers?
8. Are there other topics you would like to discuss related to this subject?

These interviews were predominantly conducted face-to-face, with phone calls and written correspondence utilized when necessary. In compliance with ethical research practices, all participants' identities were anonymized by assigning coded identifiers. The study included a total of 16 managers, comprising six females and ten males.

The chosen sample size is consistent with the recommendations put forth by Collins et al. (2006) and Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2007), who proposed that qualitative studies utilizing focus group interviews should consist of a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 12 participants. More than 12 participants risk hindering individual contributions and complicating the facilitation of the interview. In contrast, discussions may prove difficult to maintain with fewer than six participants. Consequently, the sample size in this study was deemed adequate.

3. Results-Findings

Summarized information about the sample representing the population can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Manager information

Manager Code-Gender	Sector	Experience (Year)	Management Position	Management Level	Number of people Responsible
Manager- 1 M	Public	12	Dean	Middle	73
Manager- 2 M	Private sector	10	Branch Manager	Middle	44
Manager- 3 M	Public	7	Branch Manager	Middle	38
Manager- 4 M	Own Business	5	Business Owner-Manager	Top	4
Manager- 5 M	Self-employment	9	Office Manager	Lower	15
Manager- 6 F	Public	6	Provincial Manager Assist	Top	63
Manager- 7 F	Private Sector	1	Coordinator	Middle	5
Manager- 8 M	Private Sector	3	Department Manager	Lower	5
Manager- 9 M	Private Sector	6	Store Manager	Middle	6
Manager- 10 F	Self-employment	10	Business Owner Manager	Top	11
Manager- 11 F	Self-employment	8	Business Owner Manager	Top	21
Manager - 12 M	Own Business	11	Business Owner Manager	Top	8
Manager- 13 M	Private Sector	2	Expert IT Manager	Middle	27
Manager- 14 F	Public	1	School Manager	Middle	23
Manager- 15 M	Owner	9	Medium Sized Business Manager	Top	18
Manager-16 F	Public	13	Public School Manager	Top	35
		Average 7.06 Years			Average number of employees: 24.75

This study identified several manipulative tactics employed by employees to sway managers. Data gathered from the interviews were carefully processed: narratives were condensed, key points simplified, and unstructured inquiries further enriched the findings.

The characteristics of the interviewed managers are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Aspects of managers open to manipulation

Manager Code and Gender	Opinions on Possible Areas of Misleading Extracted from the Responses of the Managers
Manager- 1 M	Unnecessary pity Ignorance of managing Exposure to exaggerations Being overly influenced by praise and blame Perception of excessive stress Closeness to technology
Manager- 2 M	Perception of working too much or too little Exposure to exaggerations Being overly influenced by praise and blame Manager's unawareness of the culture he/she comes from Unrealistic perception of crisis
Manager- 3 M	Unnecessary pity Ignorance of daily routine Don't try to abuse special days
Manager- 4 M	Exaggeration of emotions Closeness to technology Being overly influenced by praise and blame Exaggeration of emotions
Manager- 5 M	Unnecessary pity Ignorance Manager's unawareness of the culture he/she comes from Do not take the respect for the managerial authority personally. Perception of working too much or too little Exposure to exaggerations Excessive use of adverse weather conditions,
Manager- 6 M	Ignorance Being overly influenced by praise and blame Exposure to exaggerations Exaggeration of the effect of clothing
Manager- 7 F	Unnecessary pity Don't try to abuse special days Ignorance Perception of working too much or too little Manager's unawareness of the culture he/she comes from Exaggeration of religious feelings and behaviors,
Manager- 8 M	Closeness to technology Do not take the respect for the managerial authority personally. Exaggeration of emotions Unnecessary pity
Manager- 9 M	Exposure to exaggerations Being overly influenced by praise and blame about daily works Working life and private life not being separated from Each other or trying to separate completely Ignorance
Manager- 10 F	Perception of working too much or too little Don't try to abuse special days Working life and private life not being separated from Each other or trying to separate completely Ignorance
Manager- 11 F	Closeness to technology Do not take the respect for the managerial authority personally. Manager's unawareness of the culture he/she comes from Unnecessary pity
Manager - 12 M	Exposure to exaggerations Manager's unawareness of the culture he/she comes from Working life and private life not being separated from Each other or trying to separate completely
Manager- 13 M	Exposure to exaggerations Don't try to abuse special days Manager's unawareness of the culture he/she comes from

Manager- 14 F	Unnecessary pity Perception of working too much or too little Being overly influenced by praise and blame Do not take the respect for the managerial authority personally
Manager- 15 M	Perception of excessive stress Exposure to exaggerations Do not take the respect for the managerial authority personally
Manager-16 F	Unnecessary pity Closeness to technology Ignorance Being overly influenced by praise and blame Perception of excessive stress

3.1 Exploitation of Empathy

The first identified tactic involved the strategic utilization of empathy to elicit favorable responses from managers. Employees were found to manipulate feelings of pity, often through personal narratives related to illness, familial issues, or even domestic pets. These appeals, while occasionally legitimate, could be excessively exploited, thereby clouding managerial decision-making.

3.2 Managerial Ignorance

It was recognized that managers might not possess comprehensive knowledge across all disciplines. However, a lack of fundamental awareness regarding business operations was found to expose managers to manipulation. Employees could leverage this ignorance to their advantage, particularly concerning everyday tasks or minor responsibilities.

3.3 Technological Inadequacy

Closely related to the aforementioned point, technological ignorance emerged as another exploitable weakness. While expertise is not required, managers are expected to possess updated technological acumen to facilitate smooth operational flow. This deficiency, once identified by employees, could be manipulated to delay work or inflate resource requirements, resulting in labor wastage and unnecessary equipment procurement.

3.4 Misrepresentation of Work Effort

Employees were observed to misrepresent their work efforts in order to gain managerial appreciation. This tactic often manifested as an exaggerated display of exertion and, conversely, the belittling of a peer's efforts. Managers lacking awareness of this dynamic could be easily influenced, consequently promoting inefficiencies within the workplace.

3.5 Exposure to Exaggerated Data

The fifth finding pertained to managers' susceptibility to exaggerated information in various forms – business reports, cost analyses, customer feedback, internal communication, and more. This susceptibility might lead managers astray, resulting in potentially significant decision-making errors.

3.6 Misuse of Special Occasions

Employees were found to take advantage of special occasions, expecting greater flexibility on birthdays, employment anniversaries, cultural festivals, and similar events. This manipulation, driven by heightened emotions, might cause managers to deviate from rational decision-making.

3.7 Over-Responsiveness to Praise or Criticism

A trend was identified where managers overly influenced by personal appraisal or criticism could be manipulated. This tactic involved praising managers for minor achievements or, alternatively, offering undue criticism. Either response could render the manager more pliable, negatively impacting the work environment.

3.8 Misinterpretation of Managerial Respect

The authority and responsibility bestowed upon managers often attract attention and interest. Some managers

might misconstrue this attention as personal importance, leading to biased decisions and compromised communication with employees.

3.9 Cultural Ignorance

Cultural backgrounds of managers and employees influence managerial styles, organizational structures, and communication strategies. A manager exhibiting limited cultural awareness could present another opportunity for manipulation.

In addition to the identified tactics, other exploitative behaviors were observed. These included the manipulation of a manager's perception of stress and crises, the exploitation of weather or attire effects, the overemphasis on religious sentiment, and the blurring or exaggeration of work-life boundaries. Each of these elements holds the potential to influence a manager's judgment, thereby shaping workplace dynamics.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Managers are expected to perform various roles, including cost reduction, enhanced coordination, alignment of business activities with objectives, profitability improvement, and customer satisfaction. The successful accomplishment of these goals relies heavily on management principles, managerial competencies, and the personal attributes of the manager. Despite their capabilities, managers can be influenced by internal and external factors, particularly from employees, due to their shared vulnerability to emotional influence.

The ability to identify potential managerial misjudgments and manipulation within managerial tasks, decision-making, and communication processes is essential. The data from the present study reveals that managerial vulnerabilities encompass susceptibility to exaggeration, stress perception, ignorance, false work-effort representations, religious sentiment exploitation, emotional manipulation, unrealistic crisis perceptions, unnecessary empathy, attire influences, weather impacts, work-life balance challenges, susceptibility to praise and criticism, misuse of special occasions, technological unawareness, misinterpreted managerial authority, and cultural unawareness. Recognizing these vulnerabilities can be difficult for managers; however, those with a strong resolve are capable of self-realization and addressing these shortcomings.

For effective managerial functioning, it is recommended that managers acknowledge these manipulative tendencies, account for them during decision-making, strengthen weaknesses, and exercise caution against employee-led manipulations. Implementing this approach is likely to result in optimal managerial behaviors, promoting consistency and minimizing errors.

Continuous managerial self-improvement is crucial, and organizations should encourage, if not mandate, attendance at relevant training programs. Effective manager development, coaching, and mentoring processes have been shown to yield multiple benefits for both employees and the organization as a whole (Sen, 2006). Decision-making entails a conscious selection among alternatives aimed at achieving a specified objective (Sinclair & Ashkanasy, 2005); however, manipulation can result in inaccurate decisions.

Considering that two similarly situated employees may react differently to the same situation, with one being more emotional potentially misleading the manager, managerial fairness and consistency depend on recognizing these potential inconsistencies. Seeking external opinions from senior advisors, peers, or accessible contacts can provide valuable insights and foster decision-making accuracy.

Many managers committed to their roles prioritize professional assistance and training courses in areas such as management and personal development, business functions, and leadership. By gaining self-awareness and learning from past mistakes, managers can progressively improve.

The interplay between cost and capital efficiency is delicately influenced by managerial fallibility. Acknowledging the imperfect nature of managers can be beneficial, allowing room for growth. Similarly, recognizing negative influences stemming from excessive authority use by employees will contribute to a balanced management approach.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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