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# SUBORDINATES' HUMILITY SYNDROME: THE POSSIBLE THEORETICAL RATIONALE

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### *Abstract*

Nowadays, we can witness a rapid development of the information society with the automated and highly-efficient production processes. As a result, there is a transformation of production communication and relations in the 'superior-subordinate' system. This article aims to find a theoretical rationale for the understudied yet frequent syndrome in production communication. This syndrome will be referred to as the subordinates' humility syndrome. It is a new phenomenon in production communication in the modern economic climate. We have analyzed the external and internal factors which incite the subordinates' humility syndrome. We have also studied the environment which conditions the development of the syndrome. In this article, we have studied the major psychological characteristics of an employee who can be diagnosed with the aforementioned syndrome. Finally, we focus on developing the methodology for research on the subordinates' humility syndrome. Also, we analyze the preventive measures and psychological treatment for the employees diagnosed with this syndrome.

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**Keywords:** Aforementioned syndrome, highly-efficient production processes, information society, modern economic climate, psychological treatment, subordinates' humility syndrome.



## **1. Introduction**

In our modern society, the dynamic processes such as the rapid information technology development and the intensive development of the economic systems affect the structure and nature of relations in modern organizations. The rapid development of information technology has created the conditions for new tendencies to appear. In the production communication, these tendencies can be observed in the 'superior-subordinate' system and they influence the quality and content of communication as well as the quality of employees' work and company's performance in general.

There are several factors that impair organizational communication. These factors include the new economic conditions, technological innovations, innovation implementation into the company's management structure, and an increasing number and complexity of the requirements for the employee's competence. Moreover, these factors influence the self-esteem and psychological state of the employees.

Despite the growing interest in the study and analysis of the organizational communication under the changing conditions of the information society and economic realia in the world and Russia in particular, researchers have not paid significant attention to some new tendencies and phenomena in organizational communication. In our opinion, the subordinates' humility syndrome is one of the phenomena that can be observed in production communication.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In the modern scientific and academic literature, the subordinates' humility syndrome is mentioned when we consider the functions of the conflict in the organization. One of the positive outcomes of the conflict is getting rid of the subordinates' humility syndrome. However, we suppose that the syndrome itself, its causes, characteristics, and effects on both the employer and employee have not been studied thoroughly. In modern Russian and world studies, the syndrome is only mentioned but there are no theoretical or empirical research results.

We suppose that the reason for that is both the lack of the theoretical rationale of this issue as an organizational communication phenomenon and the lack of applied research and methodology on the diagnostics.

Nevertheless, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) and Stockholm syndrome have been studied well. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is the legacy of hundreds of years of slavery in the USA. PTSS appeared as the African-American survival strategy under racism, oppression, and humiliation and led to maladaptive behavior of the future generations (Degruy, 2005).

## **3. Research Questions**

According to the researchers, PTSS is a consequence of a significant group trauma that is carried over through generations and influences the self-esteem, life scenario, choice of behavioral strategies among the descendants of those who suffered from PTSS (Hammond & Davis, 2007).

Stockholm syndrome was first described in August 1973, after the hostages were taken in Stockholm. It is an unconscious defensive traumatic bond that appears between the aggressor and the hostage during capturing, kidnapping, threatening or abuse (Namnyak et al., 2007). The hostage's

psychological defense is justified by the hope that the aggressor will be merciful if the hostage obeys and complies with all the demands. Consequently, the hostage demonstrates obedience and tries to justify the aggressor's actions as well as asks for their approval and protection (Turner, 1985).

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This article aims to find a theoretical rationale for the understudied yet frequent syndrome in production communication. This syndrome will be referred to as the subordinates' humility syndrome. It is a new phenomenon in production communication in the modern economic climate. We believe that the research on PTSS and Stockholm syndrome can serve as a model for studying the subordinates' humility syndrome.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Our conclusions are based on the observations of the organizational communications in different workplaces during the survey on job satisfaction as well as during the study of the conflict relations in the 'superior-subordinate' system. The acquired data provided the authors with the opportunity to find the theoretical rationale behind the subordinates' humility syndrome.

#### **6. Findings**

The term 'syndrome' is widespread in general psychology, personality psychology, labor psychology, conflict resolution, social psychology, and sociology. Unlike the medical science, according to which the syndrome is a set of several signs of illness with a similar origin, in social science, and psychology, in particular, this term is used to describe different mental disorders and conditions of a person or group as well as their behavioral expressions and symptoms.

In this context, we believe we should distinguish between the subordinates' humility syndrome and compliance, pedantry, neatness, and high performance of an employee. In the latter case, the employee does not fear the employer as well as can properly estimate the professional environment, is highly productive and self-sufficient in their thoughts and actions.

We suppose that we should also distinguish between the subordinates' humility syndrome and so-called corporate Stockholm syndrome (Mikhailova, 2008). Corporate Stockholm syndrome can be observed in companies with the authoritarian management style when the employees are completely demoralized, they are in constant fear of dismissal, and are consumed with pathological guilt over their employer. However, they start to deem such a situation to be normal. They justify rude behavior in the name of business needs, temporary troubles, and even start to sympathize with the employer. Moreover, employees develop a victim's mindset and choose a survival strategy while the emotional, behavioral, and intellectual aspects of the psyche are distorted, thus helping to adapt.

It is important to mention that employees focus on positive emotions and neglect the negative. They also start to pay attention to the employer's mood and behavioral patterns. At the same time, employees start to feel fallacious admiration with the employer and simulate love and respect for him.

We suppose that unlike corporate Stockholm syndrome, the subordinates' humility syndrome is characterized by such a mental and emotional state when employees are in constant fear, are repressed and obedient, but understand the situation and do not try to justify the employer's actions.

The employees with the subordinates' humility syndrome stop behaving as independent individuals and, thus, become incapable of performing their long-term professional functions. It is crucial to mention that the prevailing emotion of these employees is the fear of losing the job and willingness to keep it at any cost.

To understand the nature of the subordinates' humility syndrome, we should consider the reasons that stimulate its development.

We suppose that the factors accountable for the development of the aforementioned syndrome can be divided into objective (external) and subjective (internal). In our opinion, the first objective factor is the prevailing type of culture in the given society. For example, in traditional societies, where individuals are bound to a shared goal the power and domination relations were formed long ago and have not changed ever since. Thus, individuals are dependent and ready to obey due to traditional reasons. In contrast, the dominant democratic culture helps the individuals to define themselves, be independent and autonomous, thus, able to avoid unquestioning obedience and enforcement.

Furthermore, the nation's mentality should be taken into consideration. The peculiarities of the mentality of a certain nation make people think, feel, and act according to the traditions, moral standards and behavioral patterns. In the nation's mentality, if there is collective vision, unquestionable respect for the eldest, obedience to the superior and those in power, then the behavioral models and stereotypical reactions of the holders of this mentality will foster the development of the subordinates' humility syndrome under certain circumstances.

Another important factor accountable for the development of the subordinates' humility syndrome is the economic situation under which the company operates. Obviously, economic crises cause the downward mobility of the employed population, thus triggering the increasing unemployment. Consequently, employees want to keep the job at any cost sometimes even neglecting their mental state. Thus, the unstable economic situation also contributes to the development of the subordinates' humility syndrome.

In our opinion, the subjective (internal) factors of the subordinates' humility syndrome are the management style, employee's individual traits, established group norms in the organization or unit.

According to Koroleva (2007), different management styles affect in various ways the economic performance, employee's satisfaction with his or her performance, and interpersonal communication in the organization.

Undoubtedly, the management style is the basis of the relations in the 'superior-subordinate' system and it forms vertical communication and its standards, requirements, and sanctions.

We believe that a dictatorship, which is supposed to be one of the most terrible management styles, can be triggered by the subordinates' humility syndrome.

Koroleva (2007) defined the characteristics of the aforementioned style: [the supervisor has] sole control of decision-making; employees learn about the decisions through order and command; the supervisor can take responsibility or shift it onto somebody else; no employees' initiative; when hiring

new employees, the supervisor avoids highly qualified and critical applicants and tries to dismiss such workers; the supervisor deems his or her decisions undeniably right; the formal character of communication between the supervisor and employees; the supervisor's mood affects the communication patterns; punishment is the main leverage

According to Sciryayeva and Chirkunova (2018), the authoritarian management style is a strict management style <...> [and] its real drawbacks are the repression of the employees' creative potential and initiative; lack of motivating factors; total control; red tape; employees' low level of satisfaction with their performance results; pressure on the part of the supervisor.

We suppose that the subordinates' humility syndrome will be expressed differently according to the social and professional characteristics such as age, education and qualification, phase of professional life, social status. Another factor that plays a significant role is the accentuations of an employee's character such as anxiety, low self-esteem, suspiciousness, poor stress management, etc.

Thus, we can determine the following traits of an employee with the subordinates' humility syndrome: 1) total obedience to the supervisor, compliance with the instruction and orders; 2) lack of independence in decision-making and action; 3) lack of initiative; 4) silence of problems, mistakes, etc.; 5) employee's professional functions are often automatic and mindless; 6) low corporate loyalty; 7) desire to keep the job at any cost. A subordinate with the aforementioned syndrome minimizes his or her participation in the company's internal communications and chooses avoidance and coping strategies in conflicts.

In our opinion, an employee with the subordinates' humility syndrome can experience such psychological symptoms as constant fear, depressed emotional state, high level of fatigue, low self-esteem, comparative inefficiency, strict self-control, low level of satisfaction with his or her work, pessimism and apathy, and insularity.

It may be argued that an employee with the subordinates' humility syndrome is under constant stress which in the long-term perspective can lead to depression. However, the employee understands the situation and can estimate the consequences of such behavior.

We believe that since the majority of employees work in small groups, the subordinates' humility syndrome can appear both as a small group phenomenon and individually. When communicating with colleagues who experience the same mental and emotional state, the synergistic effect enhances the subordinates' humility syndrome among the communicators.

Thus, the subordinates' humility syndrome acts as a destructive factor that in the long-term perspective leads to the appearance of mental traumas and personal deformation.

On the part of the organization, if the great number of employees experience the subordinates' humility syndrome, it will decrease the effectiveness and efficiency of labor, reduce the initiatives while increasing inertia, and, finally, it will lead to the fall in production efficiency and viability of the organization.

Nevertheless, for some organizations, this syndrome is essential for functioning. The leadership is well aware of the labor market situation and often knows that employees do not have a choice and opportunity to find a new job. The employees who are obedient, 'convenient', and ready to tolerate

anything are the shock-absorbing resource for reorganization, owner change, changes in the market conditions, etc.

Given the current economic situation in Russia, we can see such a situation in towns and monotowns where there are one or two core enterprises and people do not have other job opportunities.

The crucial issue in studying the subordinates' humility syndrome is how to diagnose a particular employee with the aforementioned syndrome.

On the one hand, in the modern study of psychology has a long history of diagnosing various kinds of psychological states and conditions and their manifestation. That is why we suppose that such states as the subordinates' humility syndrome should combine deliberately devised methods. The major methods can be a gradual diagnostic survey and the use of diagnostic scales. We have defined the scales that seem to fit the aim. These are Mississippi Scale (Keane et al., 1988); Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961); State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) (Davis et al., 2017; Spilberger, 2002). Meanwhile, it also possible to devise new diagnostic methods and practices that will help diagnose the subordinates' humility syndrome. We believe that the results of diagnostics can be applied to develop corrective techniques and then to be used by the company's guidance counsellor (Shamne & Shishkin, 2017).

On the other hand, the diagnostics of the subordinates' humility syndrome is only possible if the leadership is genuinely interested and the employees are willing to be diagnosed (some people can face obstacles due to their fear).

Thus, the diagnostics of the aforementioned syndrome is complicated even if the leadership understands the problem is willing to help the staff.

## 7. Conclusion

With the information technology actively entering our daily routine, the organizational communication system is constantly changing. The rapid changes in the society, economic globalization, constant market fluctuations, and the increasing number of economic actors make companies and enterprises renovate and optimize their organization, search for new organizational forms. Consequently, this creates problems in the system of internal communications, gives rise to conflicts, and makes employees experience negative mental and emotional states that distort their personality and affect the quality of work.

In terms of economic crises, employees are often under the fear of dismissal that is why they choose the survival strategy that leads to the appearance of the subordinates' humility syndrome.

We suppose that it is important to study this syndrome in detail as the organizational communication phenomenon in real Russian enterprises.

We acknowledge the fact that the stated theories and conclusions need to be empirically proved. They can give rise to debates in the scientific community and be criticized. Nevertheless, we believe that a comprehensive study of this phenomenon can be applied both in science and in the enterprise.

The empirical study of this phenomenon has the potential to enrich modern science with new information as well as devise recommendations for the leadership, internal communications specialists, guidance counselors to apply to overcome the subordinates' humility syndrome in real companies that confront this phenomenon on a daily basis.

We believe that in terms of the increasing informatization of our daily routine, with a growing number of day-to-day contacts, the changing nature and content of these contacts as well as in terms of growing instability of social, economic, political, and cultural processes, the new phenomena in the organizational communication are bound to appear. This will have serious implications on both the organization and its staff, that is why these phenomena need to be studied and reviewed.

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