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## A qualitative study of high-reputation plant managers: Political skill and successful outcomes

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### Abstract

There has been little systematic study of what plant managers actually do on a day-to-day basis that accounts for their success in achieving organizational outcomes. In our field interviews and observations of high-reputation plant managers from 11 manufacturing plants, we found that effective political skill enabled them to influence subordinates in ways that contributed positively to organizational outcomes. Political skill is an interpersonal style that combines social astuteness with the ability to relate well, and otherwise demonstrate situationally appropriate behavior in an engaging way that inspires confidence, trust, and genuineness [Ferris, G.R., Perrewé, P.L., Anthony, W.P., Gilmore, D.C., 2000. Political skill at work. *Organizational Dynamics* 28 (4), 25–37]. We observed that effective plant managers possessed a configuration of dispositional traits (self-motivation, sense of humility, and affability), systematically employed interpersonal behaviors (creating accountability, leading by example, and developing trust), and focused on managerial processes (stretch goals, influencing and learning from below, and empowering direct reports). By juxtaposing the political skill and power literatures, we propose a theory of plant manager effectiveness as a combination of political skill and the use of unobtrusive and systemic power to achieve both affective and substantive outcomes.

**Keywords:** plant managers, political skill, qualitative research

I walk the floor and I talk to people, and say, you know, “What do you think? How do you think they took the last all-employee meeting? Do you think they understood what I was trying to get across when I was talking about this?” And, what is nice about the [shop floor people] we have here, they are all great people and there are several of them that are very comfortable in giving me very honest feedback which is invaluable ... it is the great plant managers [who] spend time on the shop floor often and talk to the people and have a good personal relationship with the people ... the great ones get out and talk to the people. (Plant Manager from award-winning manufacturing plant).

Analytical techniques and quantitative approaches to productivity, efficiency, process re-design, and quality im-

provements have dominated the research in the operations management literature regarding what it means to be an effective plant manager. In spite of repeated calls for considering the behavioral issues associated with successful plant management (Bendoly et al., 2006; Boudreau et al., 2003; Feldman, 1987), the operations management literature continues to be dominated by an industrial engineering mindset. In this qualitative study, we interviewed and observed 11 high-reputation plant managers to find out what made them successful. We report their words and actions, and rarely did those managers mention the benefits of technology or the newest analytical tools. Rather, what we saw common among the plant managers in our study—even across several industries—was the effective application of well-honed political skill.

Management research often views politics as the domain of top management (Finkelstein, 1992; Greve and Mitsuhashi, 2007; Pitcher and Smith, 2001), or as tactics that managers can use in the exercise of upward influence (Ferris et al., 2007). However, the results from our study suggest that successful plant managers use their political skill everyday, particularly with subordinates, to achieve successful outcomes. These managers are not merely persuading and negotiating. Rather, they are systematically employing a coherent managerial style using interpersonal and political skill that help them achieve subtle forms of power in the plant, which results in employee commitment and enthusiasm.

This research addresses a gap in both the operations management literature and the strategic management literature on middle managers. In spite of calls for more case research (e.g., Stuart et al., 2002), few qualitative studies have appeared in the operations management literature that address the kinds of managerial behaviors that contribute to plant success. In the strategic management literature, plant managers are middle managers, yet middle management research focuses almost exclusively on the middle manager's role in formulating strategy (e.g., Floyd and Lane, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1997), and ignores the behaviors and processes middle managers employ on a daily basis to bring about organizational outcomes. The major responsibility of plant managers is implementing strategy and achieving goals that someone else often establishes, using downward influence (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1984). Yet, we know little, empirically, about how this actually happens. Thus, neither literature—operations management or strategic management—has addressed the question—what do successful plant managers (middle managers) do on a daily basis that contributes to plant success?

In our study, we observed that plant managers employ well-developed political skill in order to influence their subordinates in ways that helped achieve organizational outcomes. However, the nature of these managers' political skill differs from traditional views of "political" behavior. For example, we did not observe managers fighting for resources, or trying to dominate in conflict situations, or acquire advantage over others. Rather, we observed middle managers, in this case plant managers, who are socially astute, and who use their interpersonal skills and sincerity to build relationships in the plant—what Ferris et al. (2007) call "political skill"—to enable goal achievement.

As we turned to the literature on politics and power to help us interpret our findings, we were struck by how similar the behaviors and attitudes of our plant managers were to the set of behaviors and traits suggested in Ferris' et al. (2007) conceptual model of political skill. We observed plant managers doing specific things. They used dispositional traits (self-motivation, sense of humility, and affability), to help employ interpersonal behaviors (creating accountability, leading by example, and developing trust), that enabled managerial processes (stretch goals, influencing and learning from below, and empowering direct reports) associated with success. We use these findings to propose a theory of plant manager effectiveness

that includes the use of political skill to achieve unobtrusive (Hardy, 1985; Hardy and Clegg, 1996) and systemic (Lawrence et al., 2001, 2005) power. These two subtle forms of power, in turn, enable both affective (employee commitment) and substantive (plant success) outcomes.

## 1. Theoretical background

Three literatures helped ground this research: the operations management literature on plant management, the strategic management literature on middle managers, and the political skill literature, which helped explain our findings. First, we offer a summary of the relevant operations management literature that point to the gap in the operations literature regarding behavioral considerations of successful plant managers. Second, we also summarize themes in the strategic management literature on middle managers, which reveals another gap and underscores the need for the present study. Third, we briefly review the political skill literature as a theoretical backdrop for interpreting the findings from our study.

### 1.1. Behavioral issues in manufacturing plants

Wickham Skinner has made a strong case for how important manufacturing is to achieving competitive advantage and how often top management fails to understand manufacturing or develop appropriate manufacturing strategy (Skinner, 1969). Further, he argues, "our continuing obsession with productivity as the be-all measure of factory performances is to blame ... generations of production managers have been stunted by this efficiency-driven mentality" (Skinner, 1986, p. 57). Attempting to validate the need for a behavioral (as opposed to technical or engineering) approach to understanding operations management, Feldman (1987) interviewed 16 senior production managers and found similarities as well as differences in how these managers understood their roles. He used these interviews to ground his effort to "resurrect the 'management' side of manufacturing management" (1987, p. 50). Others have contributed to a better understanding of 'management' and the plant manager's role. For example, Wild (1986) examined how technology impacts the plant manager's role, Hautaluoma et al. (1992) looked at how the plant manager's personality affects job practices, and Joshi et al. (2003) argued for the importance of aligning strategic and operations management priorities. Additionally, team effectiveness in plants (Pagell and LePine, 2002) and collaborative supply chain practices (Helms et al., 2000; Holmström et al., 2002) have been the subject of research.

More recently, several scholarly works have underscored the importance of behavioral issues in operations management. For example, Bendoly et al. (2008) examined the effect of operational interdependence on managers' assessments of the communication capabilities of resource planning systems. In their study in an emerging market, Jiang et al. (2009) identified that behavioral characteristics of plant managers such as fairness, approachability, and trust in workers reduce the odds of worker turnover. Siemsen et

al. (2008) examined how motivation, opportunity and ability affect employee knowledge sharing in operations management contexts. Mantel et al. (2006) examined the behavioral factors influencing supply manager decision making. Further, reviews such as that by Bendoly et al. (2006) have begun to lay out a research agenda for exploring behavioral issues in operations management. We see the research reported here as contributing to that agenda. Our focus, however, is not on behavioral issues among workers. Rather we focus on behaviors of manufacturing plant managers. We explore the day-to-day plant manager behaviors and practices that lead to plant success.

### 1.2. *Plant managers as middle managers*

Manufacturing plant managers are middle managers who operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy, two or three levels below the CEO (Dutton et al., 1997; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990); they supervise supervisors but are supervised by others (Dutton et al., 1997). Early middle management research focused on middle managers as implementers of corporate strategy who largely play a support role, receiving plans from top managers, and translating these initiatives for the lower-level units (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1984). Other research emphasized the need for middle managers to be involved in the formulation of organizational strategy (Kanter, 1983; Burgelman, 1983; Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985) or strategic renewal (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1997). More recently several researchers observed middle managers to play important roles during overall organizational transformation (Huy, 2002), organizational restructuring (Balogun, 2003; Balogun and Johnson, 2004), strategy shifts (Rouleau, 2005), or structural role redefinitions (Currie and Procter, 2005). Our review of the middle management literature suggests that the strategic management literature, similar to the literature devoted to plant management, has largely ignored the day-to-day behaviors and activities that contribute to successful middle management.

### 1.3. *Organizational politics and political skill*

As we began to observe consistent patterns in plant managers' interpersonal styles and abilities to influence others, the "organizational politics" literature offered theoretical grounding for our study. For some time, organization theorists have argued that organizations are inherently political (Mintzberg, 1985) and that in order for managers to gain advantage, acquire resources, and win conflicts they must acquire political skill (Pfeffer, 1981). Often described as the exercise of influence through persuasion, manipulation, and negotiation (Mintzberg, 1985), the exercise of political skill often has a negative connotation. Most commonly politics is associated with conflict (Cyert and March, 1963; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988; Mintzberg, 1985) and politically skilled managers are those who are skilled at political games such as insurgency, empire building, sponsorship, and others (Mintzberg, 1985) that enable them to prevail in conflict situations.

More recently, however, ideas about organizational politics and political behavior have lost their negative connotation. Now organizational politics are broadly seen to include those activities used to advocate for and reconcile multiple interests and goals, and political behaviors are those behaviors (or tactics, or maneuvers) employed in organizational politics (Doldor and Singh, 2008). Accepting political behavior as a central feature of organizational life, however, says nothing about the effectiveness or efficacy of those behaviors. Thus, it is important to recognize that different managers are more or less effective in their use of political behaviors as a consequence of their skill.

Political skill is seen as a social skill distinct from other social skills, and is broadly defined as an interpersonal style that combines social awareness and an ability to communicate well (Ferris et al., 2000). More recently, Ferris and his colleagues defined political skill as "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2005b, p. 127). They identified four dimensions of political skill: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Semadar et al. (2006) argue that political skill is the strongest predictor of managerial performance. Others have found that a leader's political skill predicts perceived organizational support, commitment, and trust (Treadway et al., 2004), and can counteract the negative effects of workplace stressors (Perrewé et al., 2000).

While the work of Ferris and his colleagues clearly shows political skill to be useful to all kinds of managers (including middle managers), the strategic management literature has traditionally not seen middle managers as needing to be astute politicians. Rather, this is a skill usually associated with upper echelon managers who jockey for power and resources (cf. Zahra, 1985). Middle managers, if they are considered at all, have been noted applying their political skill "upward" in an effort to win resources or "sell issues" (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). But no one has looked at how middle managers apply their political skill more broadly, exerting influence not just upward, but also downward.

Our study addresses the "management" gap in the operations management literature and extends the middle management literature by focusing on downward management with an empirical look at what plant managers (middle managers) actually do that make them successful. Our findings suggest that the instrumental nature of plant managers' jobs may not be as important as the political aspect of the plant manager's role. We show that successful plant managers use political skill to achieve both positive affective and substantive outcomes for the organization.

## 2. Methodology

Operations management researchers have called for use of field-based research methods to further theory building (Lewis, 1988; Flynn et al., 1990; McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993; Stuart et al., 2002; Swamidass, 1991). We used in-depth interviews in this study to build theory induc-

tively about what successful plant managers do. We selected successful manufacturing plants for our study using theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), with the goal of choosing cases that have a good chance to replicate each other and thus extend theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Meredith, 1998; Yin, 2003). We selected cases that represented a polar extreme (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lewis, 1988), that is, we sought only the managers of successful manufacturing plants, what we refer to as high-reputation managers. We began our plant selection by identifying manufacturing plants that had won prestigious awards from recognized institutions external to the company. In addition, we also sought the names of other successful plants from the managers of these award-winning plants and an experienced manager involved in plant manager education. We entered the field study with no preconceptions about how and why the managers of successful plants achieve strong outcomes.

### 2.1. Research sites

We developed an initial group of managers and their award-winning plants based on visible awards such as the Baldrige, *Industry Week* Best/Top Plants annual lists, and Shingo award winners. We narrowed this list to plants within close proximity to our university. Each plant manager on this list received an introductory letter inviting his/her participation in our study. Follow-up phone calls identified several plant managers who were willing to participate. Our initial sampling approach is a purposeful sample of information-rich cases that “manifest the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Additionally, we used a “snowball/chain sampling” approach (Patton, 2002) to solicit informed peer judgments of plant managers with outstanding reputations for plant excellence, but who may not yet have won an award. This purposeful sampling approach allowed us to select information-rich cases in or-

der to deepen our inquiry into and understanding of our research questions (Patton, 2002, p. 46)—behavioral dimensions of excellent plant managers. Using a purposeful sample and snowball technique, additional cases are selected based on information obtained from selected sample members who have knowledge of other information-rich cases (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Each additional case is selected deliberately in hopes of confirming the theory emerging from the previous cases. The researcher’s hope is to minimize differences among the comparison cases in order to discover theoretical categories and their properties (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). Thus, our study of high-reputation plant managers utilized not only award-winning plants but also other successful plants known to the managers of the award-winning plants.

As shown in Table 1, 7 of our 11 cases were managers from award-winning plants. Two managers from award-winning plants who were included in our study suggested four other high-reputation plant managers; two plant managers were recommended by the Lean Institute director at our institution who is knowledgeable about regional manufacturing plants. These sampling efforts led to the identification of 13 plant managers, 11 who agreed to participate in the study. Although the 11 managers share the commonality of being close to an organization’s operational core, having excellent external reputations, and operating in batch-type manufacturing environments, the organizational contexts varied, seen in Table 1. Most of the plants were large with 7 of the 11 larger than the definition of a small business of 500 employees in most of these manufacturing industries (SBA, 2007).

### 2.2. Data collection

We developed a list of broad questions to elicit insights about processes, behaviors, and attitudes of these plant man-

**Table 1.** Case descriptions.

Case	Award won or who recommended plant	Number of plant employees	Products made	Plant age: older than 1995?	Union	Plant manager: age range	Plant manager: years as plant manager
1	<i>Industry Week</i> Best Plant; <i>Industry Week</i> top 50 plant	1200	Computers	No	No	40–49	3
2	Suggested by award-winning manager and Lean Institute Director	50	Auto parts supplier	No	No	50–59	15+
3	Suggested by and worked for award-winning manager (#4)	700	Doors and windows	Yes	No	40–49	7
4	<i>Industry Week</i> Finalist for Best Plant Award 2003, 2005, 2006	2500	Cooking products: Ranges, ovens, cooktops	Yes	No	40–49	13
5	<i>Industry Week</i> Best Plant	524	Contract manufacturer	No	No	40–49	2.5
6	Recommended by Lean Institute Director (Research University)	600	Air-conditioning units	No	No	30–39	8
7	Shingo Prize in 2004	700	Mufflers, converters, exhaust systems	Yes	Yes	40–49	5
8	Suggested by award-winning manager	68	Thermo glue sticks/hot-melt adhesive	Yes	No	50–59	9
9	<i>Industry Week</i> Best Plant winner	976	Coated paper, pulp	Yes	Yes	50–59	25
10	Shingo Prize in 1996, 2007 State of Kentucky Environmental Leader	440	Auto parts supplier	Yes	No	40–49	4
11	<i>Industry Week</i> Top 10 in 2005	405	Electrical outlet and conduit boxes	Yes	Yes	50–59	21

agers. We developed a set of questions based on an analysis of open-ended question construction from several qualitative studies, and we then modified these questions based on discussions with several plant managers. Personal, in-depth, on-site interviews conducted with each plant manager comprised most of the data for our study. The interview was anchored around the question of what distinguishes an average from an exceptional plant manager, with many probes (some scripted, most probes were in relation to managers' comments). We promised all managers anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Interviews were usually conducted in pairs, which allowed one researcher to conduct the interview and another to take notes and record the interview. All interviews were recorded, and each plant manager interview lasted from 45 to 115 min.

Following each plant visit, the interviewers created a verbatim transcription of the interviews (including fillers such as uhs, ums, and laughter) within 48 h of returning from the plant visit. Interviews were conducted with at least one manager who reported to the plant manager; these interviews were transcribed and reviewed for this project and were used to corroborated out findings from the plant managers. In each case, the plant manager was asked to identify at least one member of his or her managerial team to interview who could also shed light on plant operations and managerial behaviors. The titles of direct reports that we interviewed include: Controller, Human Resources Manager, Operations Manager (four plants), Manager of Continuous Improvement, Functional Excellence Manager, and Purchasing Manager. The purpose of interviewing direct reports was to elicit an additional set of perceptions about management of the plant, and to confirm what we heard from the plant managers. In each case, the perceptions of the direct reports were consistent with those of the plant managers, that is, the plant managers did not perceive themselves as managing one way while the direct reports perceived another way. We conducted the interviews and site visits at all 11 plants over the course of a 3-month period and began our coding and analysis of the data once the site visits were completed.

In addition to these interviews, the plant managers arranged tours of each facility, and allowed us to observe the plant manager in at least one meeting. Additionally, each interviewer wrote a brief description of impressions of the plant manager, how the manager acted during the plant tour and meeting, how staff responded and interacted with the managers, and other meaningful or surprising aspects of the visit. This process resulted in a total project database of over 150 pages of single-spaced transcribed text. After reading all transcripts before detailed data analysis, the lead researcher realized that none of the managers described managing upward to affect strategy; rather, all the managers talked about receiving goals and strategic plans from above and making them workable for their plant. As well, no managers described being part of a strategic change initiative; rather most spoke about maintaining the viability of the manufacturing operation. Thus, the attention of the research project focused on how and why these managers achieved success in their organizational sub-units.

### 2.3. Data analysis

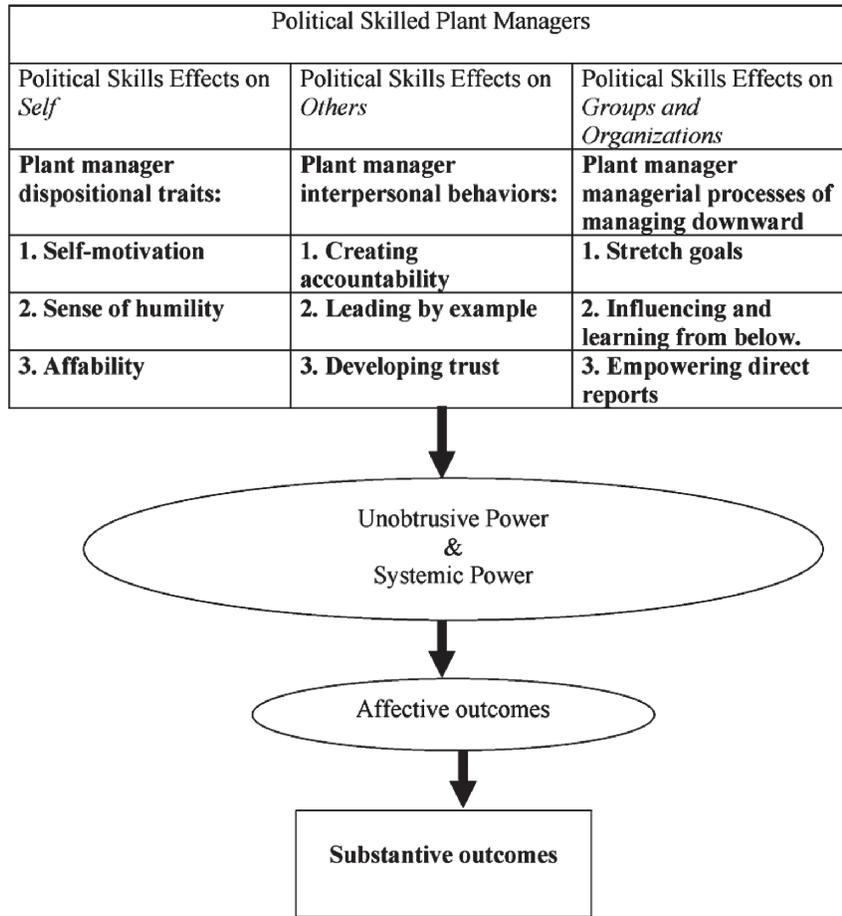
We used qualitative software QDA Miner to code the interview transcripts and utilized template analysis with matrices to code, compare, and identify patterns in the interview data (King, 2005; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Nadin and Cassell, 2005). Our first-order findings are reflected in bold in Figure 1, our model of plant manager effectiveness. We then linked our observations of high-reputation plant managers to the political skill literature and the power literature, which provided the theoretical explanation for successful outcomes. These two processes—development of first- and second-order findings—are described below.

#### 2.3.1. First-order findings

We developed our first-order (informant) findings—the frequently mentioned dimensions of effective plant managers—in a six-month data analysis effort with a team of researchers. The details of how the final dimensions of the model were identified are described in Appendix A. Our process began by breaking each transcript into six broad themes, based on our reading of the transcripts. We then induced a codebook for each theme with at least four transcripts jointly coded by two coders and with review by the lead researcher. Then, we searched for similarities in codes across the six codebooks. We grouped similar codes in an Excel spreadsheet from which we identified different dimensions within these similar codes or categories. If a dimension was identified by a majority of our plant managers, it became part of our first-order findings. The frequency of each dimension of a high-reputation plant manager is provided in Table 2. To consider why these managerial dimensions are associated with successful outcomes, we returned to our research question, which was to know more about what “high-reputation” plant managers actually do that makes them successful. We were struck by the similarities in how these 11 plant managers functioned, what their direct reports told us, and what we observed about the cultures of these plants. Across 11 plants, we observed how the managers relied on a remarkably similar array of dispositional traits, interpersonal behaviors, and managerial processes in order to achieve outcomes. Certainly, a caveat to our findings is that we did not have average or bad plants as comparisons; some of our identified dimensions in Table 2 may be more discriminating of excellent plant managers than others. This may be a shortcoming of our research, but our findings provide a starting point of factors to consider in the study of excellence in plant management. After we fleshed out the dimensions of effective plant managers, we formally presented our findings to one manager from our 11 cases; this manager was also identified as a mentor to two other managers in our study. This plant manager indicated that our findings made sense and were comprehensive.

#### 2.3.2. Second-order findings

To develop our second-order labels and fully develop our theoretical model, we used alternate template analysis where “the analyst proposes several alternative interpretations of the same events based on different but in-



**Figure 1.** Model of plant manager effectiveness. Dimensions of effective plant managers identified from high-reputation plant manager interviews are shown in bold. The circles are unobserved aspects of the model but provide the theoretical connections between a politically skilled manager and successful organizational outcomes.

ternally coherent sets of a priori theoretical premises [and then] assesses the extent to which each theoretical template contributes to a satisfactory explanation” (Langley, 1999, p. 698). We considered several literatures to develop the second-order findings or the larger theoretical connections. For example, we examined the ambidextrous organizational literature because the managers seemed skillful at moving smoothly between the strategic and shop floor levels of the organization. However, that literature did not help because its focus at the organizational level of analysis and our findings focused at the managerial level. Also, our findings did not relate to product or process innovation, which is inherent in the ambidextrous literature. Because our first-order findings included multiple behaviors of high-reputation plant managers, we used the literature on leader reputation as a theoretical departure point. Ferris et al. (2003) identified political skill as being critical to leader reputation. As we returned to our data we saw that our dimensions were similar to those in Ferris’ et al (2003) political skill construct.

As we moved back and forth between the political skill literature and our data, we observed none of our informants—neither the plant managers nor their direct re-

ports—ever used the word “politics” or “influence.” However, this is consistent with Ferris and his colleagues who note that managers high in political skill rarely refer to themselves in that way (e.g., Ferris et al., 2005a, 2005b, 2007). We realized that our initial analysis, which was more descriptive in nature, did not fully explain *why* plant managers with these attributes and skills were so successful. As we began to search for theoretical connections (Eisenhardt, 1989), it became clear that our findings resonated with new insights into power—that power and politics are not solely overt, episodic displays associated with conflict. Rather, the theoretical arguments related to subtle forms of power such as unobtrusive and systemic power (Hardy, 1985; Lawrence et al., 2001, 2005), and positive organizational outcomes provided a theoretical link to our descriptive findings. From this point, we continued to refine our findings in order to create a model of middle-manager effectiveness.

**3. Results**

From our in-depth interviews of high-reputation plant managers from 11 different manufacturing plants, we observed similarities among these managers at the individ-

**Table 2.** Dimensions of high-reputation plant managers: Case evidence.

High-reputation plant managers	Cases which reflect this aspect	% of cases
<b>Individual level</b>		
<i>Dispositional traits</i>		
Self-motivation	1, 2, 4, 6, 9-11	64%
Sense of humility	1, 3-5, 7, 8, 11	64%
Affability	2-4, 7-11	72%
<b>Interpersonal level</b>		
<i>Leadership behaviors</i>		
Creating accountability	1-11	100%
Leading by example	1-3, 6, 9, 11	54%
Developing a trusting culture	1-11 (different aspects of trust)	100%
<b>Group level</b>		
<b>Micro-processes of managing downward:</b>		
<i>Crafting stretch goals for operations:</i>		
Long-term view of operations	2-5, 7-11	81%
Linking stretch goals to operations	3-5, 7, 9-11	63%
<i>Influencing and learning from below:</i>		
Managing signals and symbolic gestures	1-11	100%
Formal unidirectional communication	1-11	100%
Informal two-way communication	1-5, 7-11	91%
<i>Empowering direct reports:</i>		
Selecting new team members	1-11	100%
Managing team processes	1-11	100%

ual, interpersonal, and group levels. At the *individual* level, we surfaced similar dispositional traits, and at the *interpersonal* level, we observed similar interpersonal behaviors that these managers engaged in as they interacted with others. At the *group* level, we found three specific managerial processes for dealing with subordinates that were common to the plant managers in our studies. These traits, behaviors and processes essentially constitute what Ferris et al. (2007) describe as elements of a politically skilled manager.

### 3.1. Political skill and plant managers

We observed individual level components of political skill in all our plant managers that we call dispositional traits. Although Ferris et al. (2007) refer to these as dispositional antecedents of political skill, we refer to them as components of political skill. Based on our interviews and observations of successful plant managers we cannot conclude that the dispositional traits lead to interpersonal behaviors, which in turn lead to managerial processes and for this reason we differ from the linear model suggested by Ferris et al. (2007). Rather, we observed a set of traits, behaviors, and processes that can be thought of as a configuration of political skill that characterize successful plant managers.<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1.1. Dispositional traits

We identified three dispositional traits that characterized the managers we interviewed: self-motivation, humility and

affability. Table 3 contains illustrative quotes for each trait.

The dispositional trait of *self-motivation* was found in a majority of the 11 cases and was expressed as the need for personal drive, internal motivation, or desire to succeed. The managers described themselves as having "drive," or as being "competitive by nature," or having the "nature to be successful." This sense of self-motivation expressed by these managers seemed to bring energy to each manufacturing plant.

A second dispositional aspect we identified was a *sense of humility*, described by one manager as "being one among many." One somewhat self-effacing manager said, "I don't consider myself great, but one of the things I've found is you don't have to be ... you don't have to know everything.... Humility is a big thing you learn as a leader." Another manager noted success was not by one's own efforts alone when he stated, "A *great* plant manager gives credit and everybody feels like they were part of it .... A *good* plant manager might be one that had great results but too much of it is about him or her." These comments, and others presented in Table 3, reflect managers who are not self-absorbed.

Third, the trait of *affability* became clear when listening to the tapes, and is epitomized by bursts of laughter during most of the interviews. We observed laughter and an outgoing, friendly nature in almost all of the managers in our study as well as an ease in interacting with people. We observed this ease with people accounts of plant tours and interactions with workers.

<sup>1</sup> The work of Ferris et al. (2007) helped us interpret our findings as related to political skill and contributed to the development of our theoretical model of high-reputation plant managers. We did not attempt to verify Ferris' et al. (2007) political skill model, that is, we observed some aspects of their model but not others. However, the overall construct of political skill as well as some of the components Ferris et al. (2007) identified were evident in our findings.

**Table 3.** Plant manager dispositional traits: Illustrative examples

Trait	Case	Quote
Self-motivation	1	I think a key differentiator between plant managers is really their personal drive how hard are they willing to push themselves and the organization to achieve that excellence.
Self-motivation	2	I think that there's one trait in a leader and that is discipline and self-motivation.
Self-motivation	10	I'm the type of person I set my own goals and my incentive comes from accomplishing those goals, and the internal satisfaction.
Sense of humility	2	I believe if you treat people fairly, you respect the guy across the table from you, If you treat him as an equal, I think that you're gonna be successful.
Sense of humility	5	I don't ever want them to think that that I am a dictator and that I have all the answers and what I say goes... I would be foolish and arrogant to think that I have all the answers it takes to run a plant this size....
Sense of humility	7	Am I perfect, by all means no. I can give you all kinds of flaws. I hate to brag.
Sense of humility	11	being a good leader I think comes from common sense most of the time, and it goes back to some of the golden rules, how would you like to be treated, treat people that way, how would you like to be lead, lead people that way.
Affability	3	So, what was the question again? (both laugh) What was the question again? ["laugh" found six times in his verbatim transcript]
Affability	4	Interviewer:And what kind of led you to this path? Plant Manager: It was what my dad did. Interviewer:What your dad did? Plant Manager: (laughs) That's how creative I am. (laughs). I just kind of watched him and thought that's what I wanted to do. [Laugh noted four times during interview.]
Affability	7	There's a lot of Site Managers who've worked for me. Hopefully, that's because they worked for me, and that helped them along their way. I hope they're good Site Managers (both laugh) ["laugh" noted eight times in this verbatim transcript]

Because we are constrained by page limits, we only provide in this table illustrative examples of quotes linked to the group aspects of our high-reputation managers. We do have quotes for each case associated with these dispositional traits in Table 2.

3.1.2. Interpersonal behaviors

Ferris et al. (2007) argue that political skill comprise personal abilities that are present at the interpersonal level of analysis. We identified three interpersonal behaviors common to these high-reputation plant managers that are consistent with Ferris' et al. (2007) notion of interpersonal level abilities. The three behaviors include: creating accountability, leading by example, and developing a trusting culture. Other examples of these behaviors appear in Table 4.

The first interpersonal behavior, *creating accountability*, was evident in all cases. The word "accountability" appeared specifically in 5 of the 11 cases and in other cases,

managers described, without using the exact words, the process of holding others accountable in the plant, and in particular through the use of metrics. One plant manager said, "I look for leaders who are going to hold people accountable and 95% of humans want to be held accountable and want a consistent measurement system and want to see everybody consistently being held accountable." Another manager, who used the word "accountable" many times during his interview, stated that he did not use any temporary workers "because if you're a temp, you're not a member of the team. And if you're not a member of the team, then somebody's got an excuse. We have team goals.

**Table 4.** Plant Manager Interpersonal Behaviors: Illustrative Examples

Behavior	Case	Quote
Creating accountability	1	I will consistently get feedback, you are not holding us accountable enough, you know there are people who are not following the dress code, you know there are people that aren't following the safety standards, you need to hold us more accountable so that is a biggie ... so I really firmly believe that I need to constantly be driving for continuous improvement and for excellence and uh and hold people accountable.
Creating accountability	6	What I learned at [an automotive supplier plant], put people in teams, train them, give them the skills they need, holding them accountable, show them, work with them, give them power to make decisions.
Creating accountability	8	Everyone in the facility is, you know, aware of their role, how their role, uh, translates into, uh, performance against corporate goals, okay, and hold themselves accountable, uh, additionally it's because, you know, it comes down to the individual, you know, empowerment of the people.
Leading by example	1	Lead by example .... If you don't do it, they won't do it. You can't expect them to do it if you don't do it. I guess you can expect it, but it probably won't happen.
Leading by example	6	So I think it can be motivating to handle your problems and be clear about that. And lead by example, and just do whatever it takes to get the job done.
Leading by example	9	Well, leaders are ... by definition ... um ... supposed to lead ... set an example.
Developing a trusting culture	1	The biggest hindrance is in an organization of this large ensuring that the communication is clear enough that there is a trust element there and that you don't have rumors flying around.
Developing a trusting culture	10	If you try to evade it or put it off, the rumors get worse and to me the distrust gets worse. They got to trust that you're going to do what you say you're going to do.
Developing a trusting culture	11	I try to help them overcome their resistance by talking with them and explaining to them and trying to negotiate and occasionally, you know, I just say, look you got to trust me. I understand that you don't think this is the right way to go or this may not be the way that you feel we ought to proceed, but let's try it, I can't do it without your support, so trust me, this is the way we are going to go, and if we fail, we will backtrack and we will go again you know.

Because we are constrained by page limits in this submission, we only provide in this table illustrative examples of quotes linked to the group aspects of our high-reputation managers. We do have quotes for each case associated with these leadership behaviors in Table 2.

We expect people to be part of the team." Managers discussed, as well, the need to hold themselves accountable. Another plant manager bluntly stated a buck-stops-here mentality, "if you lead the plant wrong or do the wrong thing, you put them out of business." Yet another manager explained, "It's not so much about the paycheck anymore. It's about, you know, having so many people that are actually counting on you."

Not only did these managers try to *lead by example*, but also most had stories of how the example of others had affected them. One plant manager told us:

One of my big beliefs is that if I don't drive for excellence there is no chance that the leaders below me are going to drive for excellence. Manage people like you want to be managed. You know? Lead the way you want to be led.

One manager told us how leading by example required getting people's attention, "You have to have that innate ability to pull people in and have them attracted to you and want to listen to what you're talking about." Managers described how they try to mentor people who work for them. One plant manager said:

I mentor people at really all levels, but I primarily try to focus on underrepresented people inside the plant, particularly high potential people who really have a lot of skill ability and particular if they are diverse, you know I really want to see those people be successful because they have that much harder of a road ahead.

Another told us:

If I see younger people come into the organization with a lot of potential, I want to make sure that they don't get lost in the corporate culture and get overlooked for opportunities. .... I don't care if it is one layer below, or two or three layers below me, I will reach to that person and say, hey let's have lunch or if it is mutual, let's set up every other week or every third week or once a month some time where we can sit in my office and chat about how everything is going.

Each of the managers in our study also mentioned leadership examples provided by their mentors, and some told us of leadership examples to avoid. For example, one told us:

I have also been managed by some pretty horrible people, who were bad managers... I didn't always have the benefit of having good people to work for. Three occasions in my career where I was working for good people who left and I wound up working for somebody who wasn't quite so good .... and those kind of experiences really galvanize you the other way

Many told us they still have a personal relationship with their mentors and used emotive terms in describing their mentors, such as "awesome," "wise ... terrific," and "inspiring."

The third interpersonal behavior that we identified was *developing trust* among employees. For example, one manager stated, "The first lesson in leadership has got to be impeccable integrity and trust and if you don't have that, you might as well give it up." Several plant managers described the need for shop floor workers to trust that the manufacturing manager will speak the truth about a situation or rumor. We also heard about the importance on developing trust of openly sharing information. One plant manager said:

So what we do at our plant is once we start developing this at my staff level, we share within a couple of days with every staff manager, we review each other's plans to make sure we don't have anything that's conflicting or confusing

Repeatedly, plant managers discussed the need for honest, forthright conversations with workers.

From our study, we not only observed common dispositional traits and interpersonal behaviors that are associated with politically skilled managers, but we also observed similarities in the discrete events and processes that engaged these successful plant managers. We refer to these as managerial processes of *managing downward* because they were not firm-level outcomes, but rather local or plant-level outcomes.

### 3.1.3. Managerial processes of influencing downward

Our study revealed that effective plant managers pursue similar plant-level outcomes. They create stretch goals for operations; they learn from below; they empower direct reports. In Table 5, we provide additional quotes to the ones below to illustrate these processes.

The managers in our study *crafted "stretch goals"* for people; they talked of the need to blend corporate goals with the plant manager's goals. As one manager put it, "You have to set the bar high enough to challenge your people to continue to reach for the goals but not so high as to make it unattainable." Most managers articulated a long-term vision for their operations and set stretch goals for their organizations, in order to maintain viability and ensure survival of their plant operations. The consensus of the managers in our study was expressed by one manager, "You gotta have that five year look down the road." We heard similar comments such as, "I think a great plant leader is somebody who can take care of the day-to-day but at the same time has got a bigger vision of where that facility needs to go." We heard some managers describe the need to narrow plant focus as one said, "I really try to limit what my team is focusing on to really three [goals]." Translating the corporate and stretch goals to the rest of the plant is a task we heard about. One plant manager stated that he makes sure "their goals are understood" because, as another manager told us, "a work force who doesn't know what the goals are, it's not going to help you get there."

A second set of managerial processes we heard about related to how plant managers were *influenced by ideas from below*. In particular, our plant managers gave priority to: (1) managing signals and symbolic gestures, and (2) informal

**Table 5.** Plant manager managerial processes of managing downward: Illustrative examples<sup>a</sup>.

Process	Aspect	Case	Quote
Crafting stretch goals	Long-term view of operations	11	You gotta have that, and I think that part of what we had to grips even in our division as what is our goals, our vision, our mission. What do we want to achieve, and not make it trite that it's just, you know some cliché words that make everybody feel good. What do we really want to accomplish?
Crafting stretch goals	Linking goals to operations	7	This [planning] goes all the way through the whole plant. I set my goals, obviously plant goals and based on where you fit in, I have safety goals as well. And [direct report]'s got safety goals and so does the manufacturing guy, on and on. It goes down to everybody's goals should all roll back up.
Influencing and learning from below	Managing signals and symbolic gestures	11	I painted the walls white, when the walls in the plant haven't been painted for thirty years. People thought I was crazy, you know. The place is dirty, you know. It can't be ... you can't paint the walls white. Well, yes we can because we're gonna keep it clean. So, I can't, I just, it's my nature to do that.
Influencing and learning from below	Formal unidirectional communication	1	Obviously email, we got email distribution lists so I can send an email to the entire team, that is very effective with a certain percentage of our population ... we've got obviously visual messaging where we put up posters, we will put up boards on the floor ... then lastly we've got television monitors where we can put out messages as well, so we can put them out during lunch of all hands meetings.
Influencing and learning from below	Informal two-way communication	2	I talk to everyone of my people everyday. If I don't it's because I'm ... tied up doing something else, but ... I like to get out and talk with them about their schedule, problems we have, what can we do to help you, how did you do at the bowling tournament last night ... yeah ... I like that kind of interaction. Straight and informal ....
Influencing and learning from below	Informal two-way communication	10	One of the things I always try to do ... is to carry a little notebook. So, if I'm on the floor and somebody comes up and asks a question ... I write it down ... I come back in a week [and follow up]
Empowering direct reports	Selecting new team members	10	[Hiring at] a manager level, generally I'll try to get all their peers all together, managers, to interview them and get feedback from all of them so it's not just me bringing somebody in. I want the peers to help decide, 'You'll have to work with them, so I want your input to feel that they can do the job,' and go from there.
Empowering direct reports	Managing team processes	9	Don't murder people for mistakes. That's a real tragedy when you do that as a plant manager. You've just absolutely shut off all new ideas ... We have a very open structure here .... I'll tell you, if you ever have an organization to work for where people are afraid to tell the boss what you want ... it's not good.

<sup>a</sup> Because we are constrained by page limits, we only provide in this table illustrative examples of quotes linked to the group aspects of our high-reputation managers. We do have quotes for each case associated with these micro-processes in Table 2.

two-way communication. All managers emphasized that being visible on a daily basis was essential. One manager told us, "It is the great plant managers who spend time on the shop floor." Several managers mentioned positive outcomes from the symbolic gesture of walking and being on the shop floor frequently. First, managers said that walking around helps them develop a "feel" for plant operations but perhaps more importantly when plant managers are present on the shop floor, it signals to workers that they matter. As one manager told us:

I just think people like to be spoken to, like to be waved at, like to be somehow recognized. Now, going through the plant, eye contact with someone I may only see once a month, but if I make eye contact with them and acknowledge them, that motivates that person. I may not get to speak a word to them, but it's the acknowledgement that I see you.

Another plant manager described the symbolic meaning of going home with a dirty shirt:

If you're just walking through, you don't see, but if you stop and stand and watch, you see a lot. You see ways to improve, ways to get better... You see the problem, you fix it. Don't pass it off on somebody else, and so we do that. I try not to ruin my clothes. My wife gets really mad. (laughs) You get grease on them. She said,

"I thought you were the plant manager?", and I say, "That's true but I get my hands dirty every now and then." But basically it's what we try to do is you see a problem, don't push it off.

A second way in which plant managers learn from below is through informal two-way communication such as one-on-one meetings, planned lunches, or monthly roundtables with plant employees that resulted in suggestions relating to parking, the quality of fountain water, better food and availability of food storage. Plant managers spoke at length about connecting with workers to learn more about the plant, what could be done better, and how to delegate shop floor tasks. One plant manager described how "our ideas come from our own people," and another described it below:

that [solution to a problem on the floor] came from the operators, people in the factory who actually know more about it than we do because they're there everyday, and we depend on that, and that's why it's so important to react when they find that kind of problem. You know, you don't want to sit back for a month and not do anything.

Another manager described his philosophy of empowering workers: "If you surveyed a group of hourly employees, they would pretty much tell you that they hold feeling

appreciated number one.... So I believe that responsibility can be very rewarding, to feel that you have some power and control."

The third managerial process we observed in our study's findings was the effort that all these plant managers made towards *empowering their direct reports*. All plant managers spoke about the important role that their direct report team members played in the success of the plant. In particular, managers consistently reported that the empowerment was possible because of careful attention to team selection and to managing team relationships. For example, one told us, "At the end of the day, it is really all about the people and hiring the best leaders you possibly can and empowering them and motivating them and they will motivate the rest of the team." A consistent theme from all plant managers was the need to hire well and to seek diversity in hiring. As two different managers told us,

It is your nose for talent and your ability to recruit an awesome team and then empower that team. I would say in my current role, I have never enjoyed a job as much as this one because the team that I have is just awesome. They want to achieve whatever that goal is.

When I am looking to put together a team, I look really hard at how to build the most diverse team I possibly can.... I mean diverse in every aspect—where did they grow up, what kind of education background do they have, you name it.

In addition to team selection, these plant managers had strong and consistent ideas about how to manage team relationships. Repeatedly, we heard plant managers talk of giving team members voice and the importance of tolerating disagreement. Echoing a theme we heard from all the managers, one told us:

There's just no way that you can manage a plant from the top down. I don't think you can lead a plant from the top down. You got to have the inputs from the people, ... you know, take specific recommendations, implement them, you know, give people credit for having ... for coming up with the recommendation, okay, measure what the expected change is, publish the results, okay, and celebrate the successes

Another manager described his weekly team meeting:

Then we meet each other every Thursday at 7 a.m. in the morning. It's 12 angry men around that table. That's what I call them: 12 angry men. That's the chance for them to vent, and it's also a chance for me to vent ... We're all humans. We all have different ways of doing things. It's good you get a chance that you have the right kind of dialogue with the right kind of management team you'll sort through problems at lot quicker if you can have really open discussions.

One described having to convince his team that conflict is not a bad thing:

Let them know that they have a responsibility to tell their point of, you know, I'm not talking about fist fighting, I'm talking about getting at some emotional what you believe in. ... You gotta finally get down to a point where they understand that this conflict isn't bad for them or gonna hurt them.

Another plant manager described it as "challenging ... where you have good constructive criticism." As another plant manager commented, "it's not all warm and fuzzy."

### 3.2. Political skill and plant manager effectiveness

Our interviews with people who reported directly to the plant managers as well as our observations from plant tours and staff meetings suggested these plant managers achieved enormous influence when they exercised their political skill, but this influence was subtle, unobtrusive, and relied on socially desirable behaviors. For example, we did not witness or hear stories of managers using any of the tactics associated with overt power such as fear or the threat of punishment (French and Raven, 1959). There were no stories of plant managers withholding resources such as information or expertise to gain stature or underscore their position in the plant. We did not witness plant managers jockeying for conventional sources of power (e.g., French and Raven, 1959). We observed politically skilled plant managers who made no mention of power. However, as we reviewed our data for a richer theoretical explanation of why political skill would lead to plant success, we drew on the literature on power, which distinguishes overt from unobtrusive power. We began to see that the combination of political skill and use of unobtrusive power enabled plant managers to achieve positive outcomes for the plant. Thus, combining the political skill literature, the literature on power, and our observations enabled us to develop theoretical propositions regarding the way plant managers achieve success.

#### 3.2.1. Unobtrusive power

Power can take many forms, but we were particularly helped by earlier work suggesting that power is not always overt; it is sometimes much more subtle. Hardy (1985) conceptualized power as taking two forms—either overt or unobtrusive. Building on Pfeffer's work on symbolic power, Hardy (1985) argued that overt power is commonly used to achieve *substantive* outcomes, that is, physical, tangible outcomes desired by managers. Unobtrusive power, on the other hand, results in *affective* outcomes, that is, feelings about outcomes. When managers achieve affective outcomes (i.e., when people feel positively about work, work goals, and their relationships at work), they will also achieve substantive outcomes, and managers do not have to use conventional tactics associated with overt power. Thus, in the case of our study, these successful plant managers exercised political skill, which is, in fact, the expression of unobtrusive power. The unobtrusive nature of their influence enabled affective outcomes, that is, shop workers had good feelings about work, which, in turn, contributed to the successful substantive outcomes. While we empir-

ically demonstrated the political skill of these plant managers, our theoretical model explains why these politically skilled managers were able to achieve successful outcomes.

Our study documents the use of political skill by plant managers in their exercise of downward influence. Specifically, we observed individual traits as well as interpersonal and group level behaviors among the plant managers in our study that are associated with political skill (Ferris et al., 2007). Based on our empirical findings and theoretical constructs from the literature on power we propose:

**Proposition 1.** *Politically skilled plant managers express power unobtrusively, which enables affective outcomes, and in turn leads to substantive outcomes.*

### 3.2.2. Systemic power

Similar to Hardy's (1985) distinction between overt and unobtrusive power, Lawrence et al. (2001, 2005) distinguished between episodic and systemic forms of power. Episodic power is associated with specific, political acts by people to further their own self-interests (Lawrence et al., 2005). Episodic power is observable; it occurs in the midst of decision making and conflict as independent actors negotiate and bargain to secure desired decision outcomes. Like overt power, episodic power has more often been the focus of traditional organizational research on power (Pfeffer, 1981). In contrast to episodic power, Lawrence et al. (2005) identify systemic power as a form of power that works through the ongoing routines and day-to-day practices in organizations. Intentions, desires, and ideas become embedded in the routines and practices of organizations in ways that influence people's behaviors and shape members' identities (Lawrence et al., 2005). Thus, social practices that influence people's choices and shape how they view themselves and each other, help managers achieve desired outcomes. These routines become part of the socialization process that influences not only what people do but also how they feel about what they do. In this way, power is built into and diffused throughout the system itself. The use of episodic power, then, is replaced by systemic power.

In our study, these successful plant managers exercised political skill, which contributed to their base of systemic power. When these plant managers walk through the plant on a daily basis, visibly abide by safety codes themselves, and affably interact with shop floor workers, they are both expressing and adding to power in the system that is contained in ongoing practices and routines. These managers shape behavior without episodes of direct power wielding. Rather, their political skill enable them to express systemic power. Our study documents the use of political skill by plant managers in their exercise of downward influence. We observed this skill at the individual, interpersonal, and group levels, similar to the multi-level approach proposed by Ferris et al. (2007). Based on our empirical findings and theoretical constructs from the literature on power we propose:

**Proposition 2.** *Politically skilled plant managers express systemic power, which enables affective outcomes, and in turn leads to substantive outcomes.*

## 4. Discussion

Knowledge about the day-to-day behaviors of successful plant managers has been missing from the conversation about plant management. Using an exploratory qualitative investigation, which relied on in-depth interviews with high-reputation plant managers and their direct reports, as well as observations of plants and plant meetings, this research helps fill in some of the gap concerning behaviors and characteristics of effective plant managers.

The managers in our study shared the dispositional traits of self-motivation, humility, and affability. There has been considerable disagreement in the organizational science literature about the utility of a dispositional approach to understanding behavior in organizations. A dispositional approach suggests that individuals possess unobservable mental states or dispositions usually expressed through attitudes and behaviors, that these dispositions are stable over time, and that they determine, in part, individuals' behaviors in organizations (Davis-Blake and Pfeffer, 1989; Staw et al., 1986; Staw and Ross, 1985). Others argue that this approach has resulted in few conclusive findings, that dispositional traits are difficult to measure, and even if accurately measured, explain little since organizations are strong situations that alter people's personality traits (Weiss and Adler, 1984; Davis-Blake and Pfeffer, 1989). Our observations regarding dispositional traits in no way resolve this argument; however, they suggest that dispositional factors *in conjunction with* other factors that we include under the label "political skill," contribute to successful outcomes for plant managers. This is consistent with Ferris' et al. (2007) arguments about the manifestation of political skill.

Our findings are preliminary and warrant closer examination in future research settings. We purposely did not seek out average or even bad managers as a comparison in order to hone our focus on what excellent managers do. While each excellent plant manager may not reflect each dimension we identified, we believe that the general thrust of the management style will be in keeping with overall concept of political skill. Much of the conversation about dispositional traits has focused on managers in general, or on "leaders" in general, with no recognition of dispositional traits that may be unique to plant managers. Our study suggests future empirical work in this area could address the question of whether there are dispositional traits unique to plant managers (or plant managers) that predict effectiveness and positive organizational performance. For example, it may be that affability is more important to plant managers than to top or operating managers because of the unique place in the hierarchy occupied by plant managers and the number of potential interactions required with those above and below them (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Alternatively, affability might have a special place in the management of manufacturing operations.

We also observed high-reputation plant managers engage in the same interpersonal behaviors of creating accountability, leading by example, and developing a trusting culture. Ferris et al., 2007 argue that dispositional traits

are antecedents to these interpersonal behaviors, but we do not have data to support a causal relationship. However, future research should examine the direction of this relationship. If, in fact, it is true that people act and then understand (Weick, 1995), then it could be that behaviors alter dispositional traits. Further, the theory we developed from this study suggests that neither dispositional traits nor interpersonal behaviors, alone, explain substantive outcomes. Rather, we view these factors as working together to explain plant management success. Because this was a qualitative, inductive study, we cannot say this conclusively, since we did not test relationships. However, the relationships we propose should be the focus of future research regarding effective plant management more generally.

We found that successful plant managers told us the same stories about how they do things, and what accounts for their success. In particular, they shared stories of using similar processes for managing downward. Recent research findings support our findings. For example, Fugate et al. (2009) found that efforts to develop shared interpretations of organizational information between managers and those lower in the organizational, through formal and informal interactions, was positively associated with organizational performance. We were surprised that not a single plant manager commented on the need to manage upward, to try to affect the strategic choices of top managers. We do not conclude from this that successful plant managers never exercise upward influence. Instead, it seems that influencing downward is what consumes their energy and time. These managers use the same three processes: having "stretch" operational goals, influencing and being influenced from below, and empowering direct reports. These three processes warrant further attention. Is it possible that one of these processes, more than another, is the best predictor of plant manager success, or even middle management success more broadly construed? Our findings do not allow us to draw these types of conclusions, but suggest the need for further theory testing research around this issue.

We observed dispositional traits, interpersonal behaviors, and managerial processes common to these successful plant managers and which we identify as "political skill." These observations allow us to offer a theoretical framework of successful plant management incorporates our findings with the literature on power and politics. Successful plant managers achieve substantive outcomes by being politically skilled and using unobtrusive and systemic forms of power. When they do this, positive affect and a culture of commitment emerge. Most importantly positive affect seems to lead to the substantive outcomes desired by managers without the use of overt or episodic acts of power.

The essence of unobtrusive power, according to Hardy (1985), is to give meaning to things that are happening and to shape the way others perceive and understand what is happening. This notion builds on Pfeffer's (1981) discussion of the symbolic aspects of power. Any number of mechanisms help managers use unobtrusive power to manage meaning: symbols, language, stories, rituals, and ceremonies. When managers infect the workplace with laughter, which was true of many of the plants we vis-

ited, they shape the way workers think about work. When a manager, such as each that we interviewed, intentionally walks through the plant to wave and make eye contact with people, he sends a message that says, "I know you and I value you." This everyday act of walking around and noticing people—even in unspoken ways—builds trusting relationships, which enables unobtrusive power. We are reminded of the words of complexity scientist, Margaret Wheatley in discussing interconnectivity in systems and relationships: "Power in organizations is the capacity generated by relationships" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 39). Clearly, the plant managers of the 11 plants we studied understood the capacity of relationships to help achieve both affective and substantive outcomes for the plant. In each of these plants, we saw a culture of inclusion, where workers had voice, where relationships had value, and where workers felt valued. While we do not attempt to resolve the debate among culture scholars of whether leaders shape culture or are shaped by it (Bolman and Deal, 2008), these politically skilled managers used unobtrusive and systemic power in ways that contributed to positive plant cultures. Further research investigating the use of symbolic actions by plant managers could shed light on the cultural forms of manufacturing plants that contribute to plant success.

We undertook this study to learn more about successful plant managers and to develop theory around those managerial behaviors. As we began to identify patterns in the behaviors of successful plant managers and then used the literature to interpret and label these patterns, it became clear that the emerging theory can be generalized to managers in non-manufacturing settings, as well. We view this as a strength of our study, rather than a limitation. Political skill, the effective use of power, and the ability to develop relationships were common to successful plant managers, and may well be desired managerial behaviors in a variety of settings. This research responds to the recent calls for incorporating behavioral theory into operations management (Bendoly et al., 2006). At the same time, it should be noted that we did interview a geographic subset of managers from award-winning plants and we recognize that there are clearly other factors that contribute to plan success than the managerial traits, behaviors, and processes that emerged from our study. Our theoretical model and propositions provide the opportunity for future research to test the theory we generated in this study, in manufacturing as well as other settings.

The managerial implications from our study challenge conventional views of management and leadership that utilize top-down approaches to getting things done. Our managers focused on managing down the organization, but that is not the same thing as top-down management. All of the managers emphasized the importance of ideas coming from the bottom up. While the plant managers in our study emphasized the need to set operational stretch goals, most times they spoke of their direct reports' involvement in establishing those stretch goals, which was confirmed by the direct reports we interviewed. The need to develop shared interpretations of organizational goals through dialogue fits recent research which links positively

to performance (Fugate et al., 2009). These managers, like the one who told us about the significance of going home with a dirty shirt, embraced the messiness that occurs as a function of giving voice to and learning from those lower in the organization.

Our study is not without limitations. Although we definitely believe that an inductive approach to studying plant management effectiveness (e.g., such as relying on in-depth interviews from the plant managers of 11 manufacturing plants) is important for extending and developing theory, we recognize the limitations of this approach. We relied heavily on quotations from interviews with the plant managers, potentially biasing our findings by the perceptual lenses of these managers. However, we corroborated our findings with interviews with plant manager direct reports; we supplemented data from the interviews with observations from touring the manufacturing plants, and from watching these plant managers conduct meetings. Had we had the opportunity to conduct this study as participant observers, we would no doubt be able to enrich or substantiate these exploratory findings. It is also important to note that in theory-building research, researchers use purposive sampling, looking for cases that are similar, that establish a condition under which theoretical category exists (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Patton, 2002; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). In this study, we chose cases that fit our definition of ‘successful’ manufacturing plants and purposely did not select unsuccessful plants because of our goal to build theory about the behaviors of successful plant managers. This is a limitation of our research. Future research, however, would benefit from statistical sampling approaches or the inclusion of unsuccessful plants, to validate or invalidate the theory generated in this study.

Our inductive study resulted in some new understandings about the behaviors and processes in which effective plant managers engage, and it offers a departure point for future research. A next step in this stream of research would be to conduct a within-industry field study using a research and analysis design Langley (1999) calls “synthetic strategy,” in which researchers would identify a number of plants that likely fall into two categories effective and non-effective, for example. The purpose of the research would be to develop additional predictor variables that can then be used in a causal model. Such research moves from “process” theories, such as suggested in our study, to “variance” theories (Langley, 1999), needed for testing and validating models through quantitative analysis. A second step in future research would be to develop and validate scales of our dimensions or variables derived from other field studies. The development of validated scales then enables model testing that could be used to further study effective plant management and could also be extended to the more general category of middle managers.

The snapshots of high-reputation plant managers that we constructed based on our time with these managers and in their plants, offer a conceptual departure point for further empirical and theoretical consideration of what plant management success means. We gained glimpses of individual, interpersonal, and group-level factors that seem

to work together—and which we call “political skill”—and characterized plant success in these 11 plants. We argue that this skill enable plant managers to rely on and express subtle forms of power, which lead to positive affect and ultimately successful outcomes. In this paper, we begin a conversation about what effective plant managers actually do, and hope that future research can help clarify the dynamics at work among these factors, and ultimately contribute to a more fine-tuned theory of what it means to be an effective plant manager.

### **Appendix A. From transcripts to theoretical model: Coding steps to identify dimensions of high-reputation plant managers**

We used QDA software and a team of researchers to code the 11 plant manager transcripts. This six-month process, which commenced soon after the last plant’s transcript was transcribed, culminated in first-order, descriptive findings of dimensions of effective plant managers.

1. *Identify broad themes.* Using three coders, we began by identifying broad themes from review of several transcripts. After much discussion and comparison of our groupings, we agreed on six broad themes: perceived features of an effective plant manager, actual management style, how manager was mentored, mentoring, character/values, and personal challenges. Two coders independently coded two transcripts for these six broad themes; we compared these two cases for agreement. From discussion of these cases and areas of disagreement, we clarified the meaning of each theme and the coding approach. Once we were satisfied with the quality of coding on these cases, two independent coders coded the remaining eight transcripts with the third coder reviewing each coded transcript and looking for discrepancies. At the end of this effort, we had a separate QDA file for each theme, for a total of six theme files.
2. *Develop codes within each broad theme.* Within each of the six theme files, we developed a codebook after reading through the file together. The team started with the largest theme file—actual management style. After reading through this theme file, we compared our independently created lists of codes, based on the quotes in the theme file. After much discussion and iterations between the transcript data and our emerging code list, we settled on 11 codes for the Actual Management Style file. These 11 codes included aspects such as team interaction, personal traits, and an “other” category to catch any themes that might emerge in the coding. Two independent coders reviewed each quote in the theme file and assigned a quote to one of the 11 codes. After the two independent coders finished coding the actual management style file, the first author reviewed statistics for degree of agreement between the coding efforts and identified areas where codes were being used differently. Almost every line in this file was coded with one of 11 codes. Only 79 of 320 lines did not overlap in this first coding effort. We reviewed the coding together to see why some quotes were not coded the same way. Usually we discovered that it had to do with coding style (e.g., length of quote) rather than comprehension of the codes. As well, all the “other” codes were specifically discussed. The files were re-coded for a few of the codes, and agreement increased to over 80%. We

continued this coding process for the five other theme files: perceived features of a great plant manager, how manager was mentored, mentoring, values/character, and personal challenges.

3. *Identifying similar categories of codes across the themes.* Although the codebook for each theme file was induced from the data, there were similarities across codes in the six theme files. We began to look across the codes (for each broad theme file) to identify codes that overlapped or seemed similar. We worked together in long sessions to link together codes from each of these six files into similar categories. Our initial categories were: vision, team, execution, process 1–outside forces, process 2–translate vision to shop floor, process 3–managing for results, and character. We then pulled all the coded transcript segments for each category together into one file (an Excel spreadsheet). At the end of these coding activities, we had seven Excel spreadsheets (seven categories) with detailed quotes.
4. *Assessing content within categories.* At this point, we had seven categories with many codes and hundreds of quotes for each category. These categories were still very broad. We began to develop dimensions to capture the content within each category. For instance, our character category contained many different aspects, such as live by the golden rule, humility, natural born charisma, work ethic, and sense of humor. Yet, for some dimensions such as charisma, most managers in our study did not mention this or use words to describe charismatic managers; this aspect was dropped from further consideration as an important dimension of what makes an excellent plant manager. We continued to identify the important features within each category by assessing if a majority of the 11 managers mentioned this aspect. If so, it became an important part of our first-order findings. We undertook this process for each of the seven categories. These aspects linked to a category form the basic features of our model. For instance, we found that for the character category (what we renamed dispositional traits), self-motivation, humility and affability were salient dimensions, and so on. At the end of this iterative process, we had identified the key dimensions of excellent managers that were found across the majority of cases. These dimensions and their frequency in our data are provided in Table 2.

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