



Using historic mutinies to understand defiance in modern organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – Guided by voice and leadership theory, this paper aims to articulate the underpinnings of upward defiance (competence deficiency; ignorance of concerns; structural gaps between echelons) and to describe the managerial actions that help depose those underpinnings.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper analyzes 30 historic narrative accounts of actual mutinies. The journalistic accounts from bygone eras provide unparalleled insight into the basic dynamics of mutiny and provide novel insights into organizational defiance.

Findings – The principal findings show that the underpinnings of mutiny in organizations derive from three foundations: disconnections between authority echelons, modes of addressing member disgruntlement, and the need for management to develop continuous competencies.

Originality/value – The paper goes beyond reports of mutinies in the popular press and lore by applying the findings to modern organizations.

Keywords Leadership, Culture, Communication, Conflict management, Organizations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Revolutionary phenomena are constants in modern business environments (De Cock *et al.*, 2007). Even within organizations, bottom-up communication from members can spur upheavals that improve the decisions of leaders. As such, top managers do not just “figure things out” from the top (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, 2003). The voice of members can be a positive aspect of organizational functioning. However, barriers and risks can hinder voice. Impediments such as penalties for speaking up about injustices or the absence of exit options can limit the expression of voice and drive organizational dysfunction. In extreme cases, member attempts to express voice in the face of these impediments can become organized into promotions of interest, suspensions of routines, or seizures of power (Land, 2007). On the other hand, voice is part of how innovative organizational systems revolutionize and recondition themselves.

In this paper, we examine a notion of member voice that ranges so extreme as to rise to the level of possible mutiny. Our usage of the term “upward defiance” is intended to illustrate the friction between members and leaders that exists in such situations. It refers to a specific kind of bottom-up force, and is complementary to the more general concept of voice. It has been addressed in settings such as organizational divisions, boards of directors, entrepreneurial ventures, and academic departments (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992). Research on these settings suggests that the antecedents of upward defiance include injustices, perceptions of righteousness, coordinated actions and intentions, and climates of



sustained tension. Yet, the richness of current narratives is modest in comparison to historic journalistic accounts of mutiny.

We examine a set of historic cases with rich documentation: detailed accounts of naval and maritime mutinies. To promote application to modern organizations, we extend voice theory to guide the analysis. The results of our undertaking help clarify the ontological status of upward defiance in modern organizational theory and shed light on its underpinnings for managers in positions of organizational power.

Mutiny and voice

We define mutiny as an organized movement by members in an organization; based on perceived injustice, marked by coordinated extra-role behavior directed upward despite barriers, and intended to subvert the existing order by usurping or overriding legitimate authority. Historically, in British military tradition, mutiny explicitly involves conspiracy and thus requires collective action (Bell and Elleman, 2003). In US military tradition, sole individuals have been convicted of mutiny (Hamby, 2002). Our definition includes multi-member coordination as well as individual disturbances of operations. Mutiny can occur by degrees within the parameters of this definition and is a common notion. For instance, the business press uses the term “mutiny” to describe defiance, withdrawal, or takeovers explicitly in organizations. Efforts by top management to reduce expressed employee dissatisfaction in hospitals were reported as “team effort heads off mutiny” (Finkel, 2003). An article entitled “coping with mutiny” characterized the attitudes and behaviors of survivors of organizational upheaval (Budd, 2003). An article with the headline “the bounties of mutiny” examined how to retain employee loyalty (Mckenna, 1990). Upward defiance is common in organizations that depend on independent contractors (MacDonald, 2005). Scholarly articles have also examined mutiny directly (Lammers, 1969) and indirectly via the dissatisfaction and concern of members (Cooper and Withey, 1989).

These kinds of upward defiance are not rational organizational actions because they are extraneous to the policies and rules that govern operations. As voluntary behavior outside the bounds of organizational operations, upward defiance is thus functionally similar but conceptually opposite to organizational citizenship behavior (O'Brien and Allen, 2008). As extra-role behaviors, to be sure, voice and upward defiance are not role requirements. Whereas many extra-role behaviors contribute positively to an organization, upward defiance is not always positive because this kind of voice emerges when members are dissatisfied (Griffin *et al.*, 2007). When barriers and risks impede voice, it can escalate further into coordinated intents, coups, or rebellions (Lammers, 1969). Voice thus provides a useful conceptual foundation for examining upward defiance.

Voice refers to discretionary, upward, and endogenous communication intended to improve an organization despite the risks associated with such communication. Voice research examines the collective communication of concerns about organizational circumstances (Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison and Milliken, 2000, 2003). Voice theory articulates a tradeoff between the risks and benefits associated with speaking up. The area stems from Hirschman's (1970) notions of members incurring dissatisfaction or recognizing opportunities for improvement but not communicating those issues to their managers. The non-communication derives from the risks

associated with transmitting misgivings to authority figures with personal attachments to circumstances or lacking opportunities to exit. Voice is “activated” when the need to resolve an issue outweighs the risks of humiliation, demotion, or other penalties for speaking up.

The circumstances created by leaders affect the benefits and risks associated with voice. Leaders are the target-of-voice, because they have the authority to make the desired changes, which pertains to the benefits of speaking up. Leaders can also administer penalties, which pertain to the risks. Voice theory holds that risks are lowered when leaders demonstrate openness and willingness to act on behalf of members (Detert and Burris, 2007). Other factors that encourage voice are traits such as internal locus of control, argumentativeness, or the quality relationships with leaders (Kassing and Avtgis, 1999). Even so, because achieving the benefits of voice can be risky, strategies have emerged for expressing voice (Kassing, 1998).

Voice strategies

Members can express voice via multiple strategies singly or in concert with one another (Kassing, 2002). For instance, a member can share factual information directly with leaders based on evidence and knowledge of rules or procedures. This mild form of voice is usually constructive. Voice can also be expressed via repetition by one or many members, in which appeals to an issue are intended to command the attention of leaders. This mode of voice can appear as dissent or seem destructive. Members may also offer solutions in a constructive manner that assumes a level of receptiveness from the organizational leadership.

If the organizational leadership is not responsive, another voice strategy is circumvention, which involves skipping a level in the hierarchy when the immediate authority figure is unreceptive or ineffective. Circumvention involves subversion of process. Finally, threats of exit are intended to compel responsiveness from the organization’s leadership. This strategy can be genuine or feigned in its intent because it depends on external opportunities for exit. It is usually resorted to when voice strategies that are more constructive are ineffective or the perceived injustice is extreme.

Despite multiple strategies for voice, the door is still not always open to voice. As we will show, sometimes barriers are too great and the risks are too high. In those circumstances, when perceived injustices are still too much to bear, and if exit is not practical, other kinds of upward defiance can occur. Those events reflect the notion of mutiny and offer an extension to voice theory.

Where mutiny fits

Although the romantic aspects of mutiny appeal to popular press usage, business research has not explicitly incorporated the underpinnings of the mutiny concept into existing theory. What is missing is the articulation of what can happen in an organization when:

- the need for voice is intense;
- upward expression is impossible due to active or passive barriers; and
- voluntary exit is impracticable.

When voluntary exit is not practical to members, barriers and risks severely limit their voice, and perceived injustices are grave, members may resort to organized action. Enter the concept of mutiny. By contrast, when barriers and risks are substantial but within the reasonable boundaries of an organization, circumstances are amenable to voice. From the perspective of leadership, mutiny is upward dissent despite institutional barriers. The construct extends voice theory to those instances in which injustice and the risks of speaking up are extreme.

Figure 1 places the mutiny construct in relation to voice theory. It is a 2×2 framework, with four quadrants, based on dimensions of perceived injustice to members and barriers to voice. Quadrants II and IV demarcate the general boundaries of voice theory concerning the discretionary provision of upward dissent intended to improve organizational functioning (Detert and Burris, 2007). Quadrant IV illustrates that high barriers to upward communication combined with moderate risk fall as studied in voice theory research. Quadrant II indicates high levels of risk combined with moderate barriers to upward communication, also germane to voice theory. Quadrant III of the framework illustrates general circumstances of organizational adaptivity, where barriers to upward communication are low and there is low risk in providing upward critical communication. These organizations enjoy effective leadership that enables upward dissent and voice. Quadrant I refers to those extreme instances, not addressed by the other quadrants, in which mutiny can occur. Upward communication barriers that are insurmountable and perceived injustices greater than members are willing to bear define the circumstances indicated by quadrant I. This quadrant, like other quadrants, assumes limited exit options.

Having concluded an introduction of concepts and development of a 2×2 framework that distinguishes the place of mutiny (i.e. quadrant I), we now turn to our examination of historic narrative accounts.

Historic examination

The relevance of mutiny has persisted formally across time and context for four centuries (Bell and Elleman, 2003). “The Articles of War”, which guided US Navy

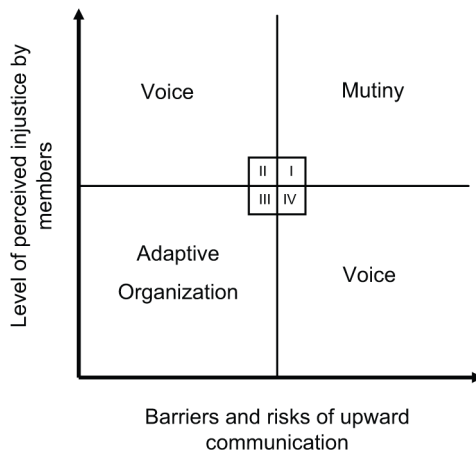


Figure 1.
An upward organizational
defiance framework

discipline in the nineteenth century, defined the penalties for mutiny but not what constitutes a mutiny (Guttridge, 1992). Article 94 of *The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ)*, adopted in 1950 and still enforceable today, states that, "Any person subject to this chapter who, with intent to usurp or override lawful military authority, refuses, in concert with any other person, to obey orders or otherwise do his duty or creates any violence or disturbance is guilty of mutiny."

Modern organizational life is not divorced from its historic and anthropological roots. The notion of mutiny in this sense derives from military service, but a mutiny can occur in any kind of organization. For instance, although industrial organizations lack the barriers to voice that exist in the military, they are more amenable to collective action based on grievances (Lammers, 1969). As such, early mutinies were common in universities (Lipset and Wolin, 1965), penitentiaries, and relocation centers (Jackman, 1957).

Historically, narrative accounts of mutinies provide fascinating insights into basic dynamics (Hoffer, 1969). Their lessons are timeless but easy to forget. An act of defiance can be general or specific to a particular grievance. For example, if members intend to seize power and depose leadership, the purpose is general. However, refusal to perform in protest of inadequate conditions as a strike mechanism is specific in its purpose and may even include a list of demands. Authority relationships and compliance structures also provide context for mutinous action. Authority in mutiny contexts usually involves coercive or reward power and limits the ranges of member options. In many historic cases, the concentration of authority was virtually absolute. Some modern organizational settings, however, have analogous conditions. For example, contracted employees are subject to such power and have taken action when their autonomy is limited (MacDonald, 2005). As well, many online or virtual contexts that thrive on member contributions entail one or few leaders with extreme control over information and process.

Environmental change outside an organization, based on elements such as technology or customers, can provide an ingredient for mutiny. Leaders do not always have a clear perspective on change compared to specialists who interface directly and frequently with technology and customers. On the other hand, specialists can be collectively misinformed or ignorant. Either way, the mutiny issue emerges when leadership acts against shared beliefs of members and the context disallows member voice. In such instances, factory workers have collectively frustrated authority and university faculty members have acted to depose administrative authority. The following historic cases allow a closer analysis based on the 29 documented accounts of mutinies in Table I[1].

Empirical case analysis

We examined mutinies in a range of contexts, including ship and shore installations, small units on isolated duty, and at ports. The variety of international settings spans a timeframe from 1779 to the present day. Taken together, the 30 accounts provide insight into the intentions of work stoppages and deposing of authority figures.

First, we screened detailed historic accounts of 40 mutinies through multiple library databases and selected 29 cases for examination. Our selection of the main sample included only those cases offering clear evidence of organizational type, mutiny type

Organizational unit(s) Country	Year	Coordinated action(s)	Reason(s)	Outcome(s)
<i>HMS Egmont</i> England	1779	Refusal to work	No pay due to captain error	Troops restored control, ringleaders court-martialed and punished
<i>HMS Bounty</i> England	1788	Took control of ship, abandoned captain and others at sea	Captain's favoritism, paranoia, incompetent officers, extended tropical port stay	Captain made safe port, some mutineers captured in 1791, court-martialed and punished
<i>Spithead Naval Base</i> Numerous ships England	1797	Well organized refusal to work, took control of ships	Low pay, poor conditions, excessive punishment, officers were political appointees not trained seamen	Parliament voted for pay increase and better food, amnesty for mutineers
<i>Nore Naval Base</i> Numerous ships England	1797	Well organized refusal to work, took control of ships	Same as Spithead	Same as Spithead except some ringleaders were court-martialed and punished
<i>HMS Hermione</i> England	1797	Took control of ship, killed all officers, sailed to venezuela	Brutal captain, excessive punishments	Some mutineers eventually caught and punished
<i>USS Essex</i> USA	1812	Threatened to take ship to avoid leaving port	Lax captain, extended tropical port stay	Withdrew threat in response to captain's counter-threat to blow up the ship
<i>USS Somers</i> The USA	1842	Rumors of threats to take ship	Brutal captain, excessive punishments	Hanged midshipman as ringleader
<i>Potemkin</i> Russia	1905	Took control of ship with significant violence, sailed as part of a broader revolution	Arrogant officers, out of touch leadership, poor food and conditions	Majority received asylum in romania, some surrendered and were court-martialed and punished
<i>Revolt of the Lash</i> Four ships Brazil	1910	Took control of ships, threatened to attack rio de janeiro	Excessive corporal punishment as general policy, out of touch officers, racial discrimination	Corporal punishment abolished, amnesty for mutineers not honored by government
<i>Baltic fleet</i> Numerous ships Russia	1917	Took control of ships with significant violence in support of broader revolution	War weariness, boredom, officer arrogance	Dissolution of ruling monarchy

(continued)

Table I.
List of historic mutinies

Organizational unit(s) Country	Year	Coordinated action(s)	Reason(s)	Outcome(s)
<i>High Seas fleet</i> Numerous ships Germany	1917	Refusal to work	War weariness, officer arrogance, ill-treatment	Arrest and punishment of ringleaders
<i>High Seas fleet</i> Numerous ships Germany	1918	Refusal to work	Response to proposed fleet wide suicide raid on British fleet	Dissolution of ruling monarchy, general pardons for 1917 mutineers
<i>The France</i> France	1919	Refusal to work	Officer luxuries, poor food, war weariness, post WWI deployment for intervention in Russian civil war	Ship ordered to home-port, ringleaders court-martialed with reduced punishment due to public support
<i>Baltic fleet</i> Numerous ships England	1919	Refusal to work	Poor food, war weariness, post WWI deployment for intervention in Russian civil war	Threats of force, arrests and punishment of some mutineers
<i>Kronstadt Naval Station</i> Russia	1921	Uprising in support of anti-bolshevik riots	Dissatisfaction with political structure, poor conditions	Overwhelmed by Red Army troops
<i>HMS Lucia</i> England	1931	Refusal to work	Overworked, no Christmas leave, painted ship on Sunday	Mutineers arrested and released without penalty by Labour government
Almirante Latorre O'Higgins Chile	1931	Took control of ships, sailed in protest	Pay cuts	Surrendered after authorities threatened to bomb ships
Invergordan Numerous ships England	1931	Refusal to work	Pay cuts afloat, out-of-touch officers non-responsive to enlisted concerns	Restoration of some pay, general amnesty for mutineers, country forced off gold standard
De Zeevin The Netherlands	1933	Took control of ship, sailed in protest	Pay cuts, command indifference to crew dissatisfaction	National authorities bombed the ship
Port Chicago Naval Ammunition Depot USA	1944	Refusal to work	No response to catastrophic explosion, segregation lack of training, lack of command compassion	Court-martialed and imprisoned

(continued)

Organizational unit(s) Country	Year	Coordinated action(s)	Reason(s)	Outcome(s)
<i>HMS Lothian</i> England	1944	Refusal to work	Ineffectual captain, bad food, no leave, resentment of mission, overcrowding	Executive officer relieved of duty, ringleaders and participants arrested, court-martialed and punished lightly
Alexandria Harbor All RHN ships	1944	Took control of ships, refusal to work	Response to Greek political tensions	Armed British and loyalist Greeks boarded, retook control
Greece Royal Indian Navy Multiple shore stations and 56 ships	1946	Refusal to work	Condescending attitudes of British to Indian crews, slow demobilization, poor living conditions and food	Improvements in administration, mutineers punished, no change in overall climate
<i>HMS Athabaskan HMS Magnificent HMS Crescent</i> Canada	1949	Refusal to work by small number of crew	Long hours, no leave, short meal time, bad food	No official disciplinary action, local resolution of issues
<i>USS Vance</i> USA	1965	Captain deposed based on junior officer influence	Eccentric and erratic leadership behavior	Captain publicly accused officers of mutiny, no official action taken after investigation
<i>USS Kitty Hawk</i> The USA	1972	Racial violence	Indefinite deployment extension, racial tensions	Individuals punished for assault and disobeying orders
<i>USS Constellation</i> USA	1972	African-American members took issue with treatment and refused to work	Racial tensions, questionable discharge of popular shipmate	Agitators transferred or discharged without punishment
Velos Greece	1973	Officers took ship out of NATO exercises	Officer revolt against Greek government	Uprising failed, mutineers granted asylum in Italy
Storozhevoy USSR	1975	Junior officers took control, sailed to protest government actions, sought asylum in Sweden	Political tensions, poor food, bad conditions, low pay	Ship disabled by gunfire, ringleader executed

Table I.

and intensity, number of members involved, contributing factors, responses from authorities, and outcomes. We also include two additional examples from the news media and personal experiences. We undertook multiple analysis stages to inform our initial theoretical conceptualizations (Eisenhardt, 1989). Our analysis of the underpinnings of mutiny has spanned approximately nine years and is ongoing. In this study, we drew from the library of the first author, which contains a large collection of narrative accounts, published works, maritime literature, and rare artifacts.

Specific analyses entailed iterations, social interactions, and presentation at a professional research conference. We related our model to the theory on voice, reviewed above to bolster construct validity. Over the years, the work has taken on a coherent whole that allowed us to distill insights that would be impossible via other methods. Our method was thus a time-intensive one. In what follows, we present our results.

Results

We discovered that mutinies fall into two general categories. The first one is *non-cooperative* refusal of duty, and was the most common form (89 percent of the sample). The second one was the more stereotypical (and more interesting) form, in which members engage in direct deposition or disposal of formal authority.

Mutiny as non-cooperation

Whereas a strike involves non-cooperation and coordinated refusal to perform, the intention is typically to change existing conditions, and not necessarily existing leadership. A mutiny, by contrast, intends to change existing conditions and often results in the removal of existing leadership. We found three factors underlying the non-cooperation mutinies in our sample: grievances, perceived danger, and participation in social movements.

Grievances. The most common cause of a mutiny is to coerce an organization to redress grievances. Two large-scale examples of such mutinies occurred in England in 1797 at the Spithead and Nore anchorages (Bullocke, 1953; Fuller, 1953; Guttridge, 1992). In the historic context of these examples, many organizations used coercive power to enforce discipline in lower echelons, and military organizations commonly used physical punishment, such as floggings. In addition, the food was poor and compensation had not increased in years at these anchorages. On these grounds, members were aggrieved. The work stoppages were organized and successful at achieving their purpose. Indeed, pay was raised, food improved and some members of the leadership were removed from ships. Here, non-cooperation resulted smoothly in new conditions and the removal of authority figures. The accounts reveal that the leadership was detached from the daily lives of the lower echelons. One reason for the power distance derived from social and economic structures of the time. Many of the lower-level members were conscripted and many officers were political appointees. The detachment made officers unaware of the needs of lower members.

The Invergordan mutiny in 1931 was a different example of how detachment between upper and lower echelons leads to work stoppage and removal of authority figures (Divine, 1970; Ereira, 1981). Threatened pay cuts and aloof leadership had

already contributed to widespread work stoppages. Eventually, there was a partial restoration of compensation and a change in government. What began as an attempt by the government to save money by reducing compensation escalated into a general strike due to unfairness in the distribution of pay cuts and poor communication about the pay-cuts.

In addition to complaints of low pay, poor work conditions, and incompetent leadership, war weariness played a role. In 1917, for example, units of the Russian Baltic Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet incurred non-cooperation mutinies (Epkenhans, 2003). In both cases, members grew tired of fighting and weary of the arrogance and indifference of the leadership and thus refused to carry out their duties. In the Russian case, this action was a factor in the revolution and abdication of the Tsar. In the German case, initial work and hunger strikes led to a government order to establish member-run committees to oversee member interests. The leaders ignored the order, leading to the work stoppage. However, the movement collapsed when activists of the mutiny were arrested. The leadership still refused to redress grievances, which drove greater member resentment.

Another example occurred in 1933 on a Dutch battleship, *De Zeven Provinciën*. While on extended duty in the East Indies, officer indifference to crewmember concerns and rumors of a pay cut led to a mutiny that successfully took over the ship and demanded concessions from the government (Anthony, 1953). In this case, unlike the Invorgordan example, the Dutch bombed their own ship and then arrested and punished the mutineers. The ship's leadership was then court-martialed for dereliction of duty.

Perceived danger. Another factor is the refusal to work due to perceived danger deriving from extreme circumstances. Though the prevalence of organizations undertaking such work is lower today than in earlier historic periods, members of modern organizations do sometimes work in dangerous circumstances (e.g. mining and construction companies). One account of a mutiny based on such extreme circumstances occurred in 1918. Faced with inevitable defeat in WWI, the leadership of the German fleet plotted a decisive strike designed to preserve their honor (Guttridge, 1992). Their plan was to brazenly draw the British from their anchorages and engage them in a fight to the finish. Weary crewmembers, aware of the plan, decided that the honor of the leadership was not worth the cost of their lives and collectively refused duty. Within two weeks, their actions hastened abdication of the Kaiser and signing of the Armistice.

Racial discrimination and a catastrophic explosion led workers at the Port Chicago Naval Ammunition depot to mutiny (Allen, 1989). On July 17, 1944, the ship *E.A. Bryan* exploded at the pier while being loaded with munitions. The explosion killed 320 people, injured 400 more, and destroyed ships, piers, and buildings. The crews were almost entirely African-Americans with little training. Twenty-two days later, the depot was rebuilt and operations had resumed. The same loading crews, who had been given no leave or support, were ordered to load bombs. Most of them refused. The leadership responded with the threat of severe punishment, causing all but 50 members to return to work. The 50 members who refused were given harsh prison terms.

Although not one of the mutinies in our dataset, one more recent event in the Iraq war highlights the same kind of mutiny. On October 13, 2004, 19 members of an Army

Reserve transportation unit refused to embark on a fuel delivery mission. They perceived unnecessary risks because the journey was to be made in unarmored vehicles. Purportedly, the fuel to be delivered was also contaminated. Those soldiers were detained and the unit commander was dismissed. Investigators noted that some of the complaints by the soldiers were valid but everyone involved was disciplined (Reservists, 2004).

Another example comes from the personal experience of the first author in a mutinous assembly on a US Coast Guard cutter in the North Atlantic in 1973. At the height of a severe winter gale, a hull leak was reported. When no information was forthcoming, the off-duty crewmembers threatened to refuse duty until they were assured that repairs were in progress. In this case, the Captain communicated directly with the crew. Despite his usual aloofness and low interpersonal skills, he acknowledged the complaints, described what was being done, and showed concern. Though he was a strict disciplinarian and disliked, he was technically competent. His credibility as an expert, combined with unexpected concern, completely defused the situation.

Larger social movements. Other mutinies have purposes related to societal issues or movements. These mutinies typically also reflect a need to address grievances. The German and Russian incidents (above) during WWI, for example, while initiated by immediate discontent, were part of broader nationwide social change. Both mutinies were factors in a change in government. Moreover, agents of the revolutionary movement in both cases were instrumental in inciting the mutinies. Similarly, elements of communist factions were active at Invergordan in organizing and carrying out the mutiny.

Events on two US aircraft carriers during the Vietnam War highlight the complex social factors involved with mutinous events (Guttridge, 1992). The early 1970s saw increasing social opposition to the war and significant grievances from racial minorities regarding fair treatment. These issues came to violence on the *USS Kitty Hawk* in October 1971. After six months at sea, the ship was ordered to extend duty indefinitely. Racial tension was already simmering between black and white crewmembers, but after the announcement, strife turned to violence as scattered assaults took place between coordinated groups. Order was restored after direct meetings between the leadership and representatives of the opposing groups. Subsequent investigations identified a few key individuals who were charged with assault.

Two weeks later, the leadership of the *USS Constellation* also attempted to head off increasing tension among crewmembers by holding an open forum meeting on racial issues. At the same time, numerous sailors were being processed for early administrative discharges because of actions related to the tension. When crewmembers found out that an influential African American crewmember was selected for discharge, they gathered in coordinated opposition. A combination of meetings and security measures prevented violence. Once the ship returned to port, those who had been organizers were transferred or discharged. Both incidents prompted authorities to re-examine recruiting standards, enhance training in racial issues, and discharge large numbers of problem members.

Mutiny to depose authority

Although most popular notions of mutiny fall into this category, mutiny to depose authority is a relatively small part of the historic record. In popular culture, the most famous case is the *HMS Bounty* (Guttridg, 1992; Hough, 1973). Some details of the events precipitating this mutiny are dramatized, but the results are clear. On April 28, 1789, Fletcher Christian and a coordinated group seized command, dispatched the captain and 18 members in a well-stocked landing boat and took the ship. A plurality of theories has sought to explain the mutiny, with the one point of agreement that Bligh was a difficult leader. He was known to be extremely egocentric, given to fits of rage, and prone to favoritism. After seven months at port in Tahiti, Bligh concluded that most of the officers were worthless and regularly berated them in public. Despite high technical competence, his interpersonal competence was low.

A more modern example involving competence occurred on the *USS Vance* in 1966 during the Vietnam War when Marcus Arnheiter took command. Over a period of a few months, he demonstrated eccentricities (e.g. requiring a white toilet seat instead of a black one) and derelictions (e.g. submitting false position reports to show the ship was on station when it was actually encroaching on another ship's mission). After authorities received a letter from Arnheiter's operations officer, a chaplain was assigned to the *Vance* to investigate. The chaplain's report was so alarming that Arnheiter was removed from command immediately, 99 days after his appointment. Over the next several months, Arnheiter maintained that he had actually been the victim of mutiny. Despite using the media in attempts to return to his leadership position, he was not successful (Guttridg, 1992).

Our analysis allows the identification of some general principles from these cases as findings that are applicable to modern organizations. We now present key findings.

Findings

How can historic records of famous mutinies inform management in contemporary organizational contexts? If one agrees that influence is an important part of being a leader, one implication is that mutinies are a unique view into the structure of leadership. For instance, Guttridg (1992) explained that mutinies "reflect a gross personal failure of officership". We reframe the notion to posit that a mutiny is a kind of extreme substitute for leadership (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). After all, the intent of a mutiny involves a definite substitution with respect to current leadership. Moreover, to the degree a mutiny leads to negative outcomes, as noted in the introduction, it is also a kind of tragedy driven by members. Aside from perspectives on leadership, our examination revealed three principal implications for managerial action:

- (1) Manage the gap between echelons.
- (2) Address sources of disgruntlement.
- (3) Develop competence continuously.

At first blush, the implications seem like truisms or common sense. However, our elaboration delineates features of organizational contexts missed by a general sociological approach. We show in what follows how they go beyond contributions that emphasize movements from a sociological perspective (Davis *et al.*, 2005). We tailor our findings to management and organizational contexts, in which there are

levels of authority and divisions of labor defining the structure of an organization. The presence of an external environment that evolves also adds unique aspects that do not apply to traditional examinations of mutiny (Lammers, 1969).

Manage the gap between echelons

In almost all of the mutinies we examined, sharp divisions separated members and created an upward communication barrier. This finding is germane to the importance of voice, which plays an important role in member satisfaction and organizational performance (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). This finding also reflects Hamby's (2002) that "leaders who cannot identify with their troops, who cannot develop and maintain a bond of trust and faith with their men, contribute more than anything else to mutiny". Drawing again from the notion of substitutes for leadership, we posit that greater focus on the space between themselves and members is a way for leaders to improve organizational functioning.

It is all too easy for leaders to forget the organizational context in which they are embedded. If context is ignored, attempts to motivate or satisfy members can translate into the overtly awkward dealings of one who is out of touch. By contrast, leaders can create contexts that acknowledge members via management decisions made in relation to them. There is a universe of management decisions about resource allocations made in the course of performing as a leader. It is more important to consider the membership when making those management decisions than to offer lip service to member attitudes. Members respond more directly to the former because they live with the results of those management decisions daily. We refer to this implication as "managing the gap" and posit that effective leaders understand the significance of the gap and explicitly act to reduce its negative effects on organizational membership.

In all the cases we examined, leaders were physically and socially disparate from members of lower echelons. However, members of middle-level authority, despite closer contact, also ignored issues of high interest to other members. The operations of contemporary organizations reflect similar phenomena, especially unionized ones or ones relying on manual labor in developing economies. As we have noted, if member needs are unmet, friction emerges. However, the dysfunction compounds itself when middle management shares the orientation of the leadership. That is precisely when the dysfunction can become entrenched.

Though the societal structures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to such divisions, similar patterns existed in the twentieth century. For example, lagging post-WWII demobilization resulted in coordinated protests, demonstrations, and work stoppages in US military units (Lee, 1966). A *Stars and Stripes* (*Time*, 1946, p. 21) editorial cited in *Time* magazine reported that the disgruntlement stemmed from a "caste system inherited from Frederick the Great of Prussia and the eighteenth century British Navy . . ." The results of such a system, in the eyes of the members, were that the leadership enjoyed ". . . bigger and cheaper supplies of liquor, better clubs, the best seats at theaters, [and] all the dates with nurses and Red Cross girls". Indeed, modern organizations that structure work through independent contractors and drive low autonomy via centralization exhibit similar characteristics (MacDonald, 2005). The bellwether profile is advantaged but aloof leadership, dissatisfied members, perceived injustice, and risks pertaining to speaking up. Again, failure to manage the gap is not

just being out of touch with the needs of the members of their organizations. Instead, it is management decisions that do not consider member needs.

Gaps between echelons also make for low awareness of escalations toward mutiny. It allows a mutiny to develop and remain undetected until after the fact. Guttridge (1992), p. 51) noted that the wife of the Earl of Spencer, when commenting on the Spithead mutiny, “marveled that a mutiny could have brewed three months without the officers getting wind of it”. The leadership and voice literatures emphasize the same issue of managing the gap (Kouzes and Posner, 2002; Pfeffer and Veiga, 1999).

Modern organizations carry numerous instances of the friction between upper and lower echelons. If not managed appropriately, simple pay and status differentials, information availability, and terms and conditions of employment can develop into divisive issues. When CEO compensation levels are unlinked to performance, member layoffs suggest a major disconnect (Hymowitz, 2005). For example, shortly after members of United Airlines agreed to a significant pay cut, management submitted a proposal to the bankruptcy court for executive retention bonuses of over \$100 million (Dicus, 2003).

Current military doctrine also addresses the gap between leaders and followers. Tribus (2005) notes that leaders who rely on positional authority do not understand their organizations or their members. That is why voice allows a leader to receive wisdom. Kouzes and Posner (2002) explain, “leaders must know their constituents and speak their language”. Managing the gap entails knowing what jobs entail and how those jobs fit into the broader organizational context.

Address sources of disgruntlement

Managing the gap between echelons helps one to address sources of disgruntlement. The narrative accounts in our sample provide considerable detail as to the various physical and psychological factors relating to the dissatisfaction. Therefore, these accounts allow us to distinguish between triggers and causes of mutinies that derive from disgruntlement. This contribution is important because there are multiple issues that influence any mutinous event. Bell and Elleman (2003) suggest that, “mundane material grievances can be more than just a ‘trigger’ for mutiny: they are often sufficient causes in and of themselves”. The notion is aligned with organizational change theory about member concerns (Cummings and Worley, 2001).

Some underpinnings of mutiny are triggers, whereas others are direct causes. For example, the refusal of Potemkin sailors to eat spoiled food was a trigger that resulted in mutiny because they were already concerned about other issues. Yet, aloof leaders, brutal conditions, and social unrest were the driving factors (Hough, 1961). As noted, the perceived unjust transfer of a popular member of the *Kitty Hawk* was the trigger for mutinous events that derived from racial tension and a prolonged deployment (Guttridge, 1992). Leaders can reduce the likelihood of mutinous events by acknowledging and addressing the underlying factors and preventing potential trigger events.

Management styles, working conditions, compensation, and employment terms are common sources of disgruntlement. A review of daily news wires provides evidence of corporate restructurings, bankruptcies, executive malfeasance, economic conditions, and global tensions that create these sources. Our findings hold that leaders must not

only address these issues in some way, but also share in the discomfort of their existence and correction. Otherwise, a dysfunctional gap emerges in an organization. This implication seems a simplistic assertion; it is often ignored and bears emphasizing. Kouzes and Posner (2002) argue that managers can achieve greater solidarity with members and organizational awareness via voice.

Develop competence continuously

The technical and interpersonal competencies of leaders can result in mutinies. Yet, it is not clear which competencies are most important. Captain Bligh was recognized as a skilled navigator and seaman who lacked emotional intelligence, empathy, and social skills (Hough, 1973). Despite the likelihood that his interpersonal competence may have contributed to the mutiny, his technical competence allowed him to survive by navigating a skeleton crew across thousands of miles of ocean.

Studies of high-risk situations show that no amount of competence will command respect or obedience when lives are at risk (Kolditz, 2005, p. 13). Our data suggest strongly when a pattern of deficiency in personal or technical competence combines with ignorance of member concerns and a gap between echelons, it establishes the foundation for upward defiance and mutinous action.

Conclusion

Whereas we focused on factors conducive to mutiny, the place of mutiny with respect to voice theory can be clarified by examining the characteristics of mutineers and situations in which mutiny does not take place. Is there a particular type of individual with the predisposition to undertake mutiny? Our research does not suggest such a type, but instead that a mutiny is a social phenomenon that emerges from relations among many people. Though the organized, coordinated aspects of mutiny usually have a ringleader, the individual typically emerges and the development of action requires more than the purview of a single individual. The individuals seen as the leaders of mutinies typically found themselves in that role, rather than having sought it. Mutiny arises from a convergence of dynamic elements in an organizational context and does not follow traditional assumptions about leaders and followers. A closer look at the “ringleaders” may provide insights into emergent leadership in contexts of organizational upheaval.

Our focus on extreme cases of voice as mutiny allowed us to compare cases and extract underlying themes. Though our conclusions are consistent with most perspectives on voice, we cannot conclude that the conditions will result in mutiny or that their absence will preclude mutiny. Although not available in the data, future research could examine cases in which mutinies did not occur despite existence of the foundations for mutiny. If there are enough available examples of such cases, studies could identify factors that mitigate upward defiance. For example, case studies of the US Coast Guard’s after Hurricane Katrina or similar cases could provide data to examine this question. The absence of the identified foundations in successful operations would strengthen the arguments about the underpinnings of mutiny.

Our review of mutinies intended to explore whether authority figures in the sample engaged in identifiable patterns of behavior. The evidence suggests that they did. Mutinies occurred when there was deficiency in personal or technical competence,

ignorance of member concerns and a gap between echelons. Reducing these underpinnings prevents the seeds of upward defiance from taking root.

Despite our historical data, there are parallels in modern organizational life. For instance, to what extent can executives in a bureaucracy understand lower organizational levels? Our results are relevant to a broader international context. The circumstances described in this paper can be especially extreme in developing economies. Mutiny is only a failure of leadership when leaders promote conditions that foster its underpinnings. Our findings shed some light on these underpinnings and clarify what can be done to create and promote healthier contexts.

Note

1. The thirtieth mutiny, described in the following, comes from a 1973 experience incurred by the first author.

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