

# Strategic Leniency

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**Strategic Leniency** (Blau and Myer, 1973; Hoy & Miskel, 2015) *is a technique for using formal authority to create informal authority.* A major challenge facing all leaders is to expand their sphere of influence and authority. Leaders have a trove of formal tools at their disposal to nudge, coerce, constrain, and discipline, as well as to support, encourage, and help subordinates. Although formal authority produces willing compliance to basic suggestions, it cannot force employees to devote their ingenuity, initiative, and effort to perform a task to the best of their abilities. A *dilemma of formal authority* is that its power rests on the use of formal sanctions, but frequent use of restrictions and punishment weakens their efficacy. A contrasting strategy is to use informal authority rather than formal to get gain compliance from subordinates, which often does release the creativity and ingenuity of employees.

Strategic leniency is not the same as indulgence. Strategic is the operative word. Westermarck (1908) concluded a century ago, "To requite a benefit, or to be grateful to him who bestows it, is probably everywhere, at least under certain circumstances, regarded as a duty." If there is a universal norm in American culture, it is the **norm of reciprocity**: *When someone does you a good turn, you feel obligated to return the favor* (Gouldner, 1960). How many times has your spouse reminded you that you owe a friend dinner, that is, "it is our turn?" It should not be surprising that principals can use reciprocity and strategic leniency to good advantage.

Using formal authority to perform special favors and build goodwill among subordinates is an approach that can be selectively and prudently employed to create obligations and to eventually expand authority. Let's take a school example. Principals, as of keepers of the rules, have the power to enforce rules strictly, bend them a little, or sometimes ignore them. When the basis of a teacher request to use a personal leave-day is a little iffy, after suggesting that the request does not meet the "letter of the law," the principal may decide to favor the request, thus building goodwill and obligation. If principals consistently and

fairly make reasonable exceptions for their faculty, ignore minor infractions, give teachers the benefit of a doubt, and bend the rules occasionally to help teachers, over time teacher norms of support and allegiance to the principal will emerge in the informal organization. Thus, a principal's selective, fair, and measured leniency (strategic leniency) generates informal authority to supplement the formal.

#### Summary of Key Concepts

- **Dilemma of formal authority:** *formal power rests on the use of formal sanctions, but frequent use of restrictions and punishment weakens their efficacy.*
  - **Norm of reciprocity:** *When someone does you a good turn, you feel obligated to return the favor.*
  - **Strategic leniency** *is creating informal authority by being tactically lenient in not enforcing formal sanctions, thereby creating good will and a sense of obligation. Over time, norms of support and allegiance to the superior develop. Ironically, by **not** strongly enforcing formal authority in a fair and reasonable way, strategic-lenient leaders can develop informal authority to complement their formal authority.*
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