

3.4: Status

Learning Objectives

1. Define status
2. Discuss behaviors associated with high status in a group
3. Identify dangers associated with status differentials

When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen. - Advertising slogan for a stock brokerage firm.

If you want to see your plays performed the way you wrote them, become President. - Vaclav Havel

The higher up you go, the more mistakes you are allowed. Right at the top, if you make enough of them, it's considered to be your style. - Fred Astaire

Status can be defined as a person's level of importance or significance within a particular environment. In a group, members with higher status are apt to command greater respect and possess more prestige than those with lower status.

Have you ever wanted to join a group partly because you knew other people would respect you a little more if they knew you were a member of it? Whether an informal group, a club, or any other kind of organization thrives or fades away may depend to some degree on whether belonging to it is perceived as being a sign of status. In fact, one of the major reasons why many of us enter groups is that we expect to gain status by doing so.

Understanding status, thus, can help both group members and the groups they join function smoothly and productively.

Origins of Status in a Group

Where does a group member's status come from? Sometimes a person joins a group with a title that causes the other members to accord him or her status at their first encounter. In professional circles, for instance, having earned a "terminal" degree such as a Ph.D. or M.D. usually generates a degree of status. The same holds true for the documented outcomes of schooling or training in legal, engineering, or other professional fields. Likewise, people who've been honored for achievements in any number of areas may bring status to a group by virtue of that recognition if it relates to the nature and purpose of the group.

Some groups may confer status upon their members on the basis of age, wealth, physical stature, perceived intelligence, or other attributes. On one floor of a new college residence hall where one of the authors lived, for example, two men gained instant status. Why? Because they both took part in varsity athletics, and one of them was the son of an All-American football player.

Once a group has formed and begun to sort out its norms, it will also build upon the initial status that people bring to it by further allocating status according to its own internal processes and practices. For instance, choosing a member to serve as an officer in a group generally conveys status to that person.

The two athletes in the residence hall just mentioned were elected president and vice president of their floor, which simply reflected their original status. Meanwhile, other residents were chosen to fill additional roles in the group's government, which did add to those individuals' status.

What High Status Means

All right. Let's say you've either come into a group with high status or have been granted high status by the other members. What does this mean to you, and how are you apt to behave? Here are some predictions based on research from several sources (Beebe, S.A., & Masterson, J.T., 2006, Borman, 1989; Brilhart & Galanes, 1997; and Homans, 1992): Beebe, S.A., & Masterson, J.T. (2006). *Communicating in small groups: Principles and practices* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson. Borman, E.G. (1989). *Discussion and group methods: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). New York: Harper and Row. Brilhart, J.K., & Galanes, G.J. (1997). *Effective group discussion*. Dubuque, IA: Brown. Homans, G.C. (1992). *The human group*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World).

First, the volume and direction of your speech will differ from those of others in the group. You'll talk more than the low-status members do, and you'll communicate more with other high-status members than you will with lower-status individuals. In addition, you'll be more likely to speak to the whole group than will members with lower status.

Second, some indicators of your participation will be particularly positive. Your activity level and self-regard will surpass those of lower-status group members. So will your level of satisfaction with your position. Furthermore, the rest of the group is less likely to

ignore your statements and proposals than it is to disregard what lower-status individuals say.

Finally, the content of your communication will probably be different from what your fellow members discuss. Because you may have access to special information about the group's activities and may be expected to shoulder specific responsibilities because of your position, you're apt to talk about topics that are relevant to the central purposes and direction of the group. Lower-status members, on the other hand, are likely to communicate more about other matters.

When group members' status is clear to everyone, it becomes easier for all members to understand what they expect of each other. They'll know, among other things, whom to approach when they're wondering about how the group operates or are grappling with a problem that concerns them all.

If you've got high status, then, be prepared to have people approach you with questions and concerns that you'd otherwise not encounter. If it makes you feel good to help others in this way, having high status will probably enhance your self-respect and self-esteem. If it doesn't, you may feel overwhelmed.

Dangers of Status

Having people with different status levels adds spice and diversity to a group. It can, however, also result in risks and challenges.

Here's an example. In one large state, all the public and private college presidents have joined into an association to share information and promote their common interests. The executive director of the association is a woman we know well. She organizes the group's meetings, distributes agendas and minutes, and provides other high-level support for the group. According to this woman, presidents in the group continuously jockey for position and status. In fact, they spend so much time trying to gain more status that they sometimes fail to contribute constructively to the work of the association.

At one annual conference of the presidents' organization, a particularly prominent and nationally-known figure from the business world was on the schedule as an after-lunch speaker. Several of the most active and assertive presidents approached the executive director and asked her to seat them next to the visitor at lunch.

Our friend was in a quandary. She didn't want to disappoint or displease any of the presidents. She knew, though, that no matter whom she allowed to sit next to the important visitor, all the other presidents who'd approached her would be disgruntled. We'll explain in a later section of this book how she solved this vexing problem. The point, for now, is simply that competition among status seekers can disrupt a group's progress.

"If you're riding ahead of the herd, take a look back every now and then to make sure it's still there."

Will Rogers

A second peril associated with the inevitable status differences in a group is the possibility that status may not correspond to competence. We'd like to believe that groups are meritocracies—that is, that they recognize and reward talent. Sometimes, however, people's talents may be submerged or suppressed instead.

People in groups sometimes gain status and its perks just by sticking around longer than anyone else. Being involved in a group for an extended period does not, however, necessarily lead to wisdom or the capability to handle new responsibilities. As someone once put it, "It's possible to have 10 years of experience or one year of experience 10 times." Lawrence Peter (Peter, L.J., & Hull, R.(1969). *The Peter Principle: Why things always go wrong*. New York: William Morrow and Company) made a case for what he called "The Peter Principle," which stated that everyone in an organization rises to his or her level of incompetence and that eventually every role is performed by someone unfit to manage it.

Someone who gains status without possessing the skills or attributes required to use it well may cause real damage to other members of a group, or to a group as a whole. A high-status, low-ability person may develop an inflated self-image, begin to abuse power, or both. One of us worked for the new president of a college who acted as though his position entitled him to take whatever actions he wanted. In the process of interacting primarily with other high-status individuals who shared the majority of his viewpoints and goals, he overlooked or pooh-poohed concerns and complaints from people in other parts of the organization. Turmoil and dissension broke out. Morale plummeted. The president eventually suffered votes of no confidence from his college's faculty, staff, and students and was forced to resign.

There's no such thing as a "status neutral" group—one in which everyone always has the same status as everyone else. Some people are always going to have higher status than others. As we've noted in this section, a group can make positive use of status differentials if it first recognizes them and then

Key Takeaway

Differences in status within a group are inevitable and can be dangerous if not recognized and managed.

Exercise 3.4.1

1. Think of a time when you aspired to a new and higher status within a group. How did you demonstrate your desire? How did others in the group respond when you expressed what you hoped to achieve?
2. Recall a time when you gained status in a group. How, if at all, did the other members treat you differently after you acquired it? What new responsibilities or expectations did you face?
3. Consider a group that you're part of. What advice would you offer to someone seeking to raise his or her status in that group?
4. Have you ever been part of a group in which all the members seemed to have the same status? How were the group's activities affected by this equivalence?

This page titled [3.4: Status](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Michael Brown](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- [4.3: Status](#) by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/an-introduction-to-group-communication>.