When a sudden boost in status at work isn't all good

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Imagine getting a sudden boost in status at work that changes you from a largely ignored worker to someone that others turn to for advice and help.

Sounds great, doesn't it? But a new study finds that an unanticipated gain in status can come with some negative baggage - if you did not earn the boost.

Researchers studied American employees of a Japanese firm who didn't enjoy particularly high status with the company - until it adopted English as its official language. Then, all of a sudden, Japanese employees who didn't speak English had to rely a lot more on their American counterparts.

While the American employees enjoyed their sudden boost in status, they also had some misgivings, said Tracy Dumas, co-author of the study and assistant professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"It wasn't all positive. It was very obvious that the American employees knew that they lucked into this change of status and were very aware that the status boost was not tied to their performance or achievement," Dumas said.

"They had a feeling that their good luck was unstable - that another new policy could reverse their good fortune."

The study highlights the dynamic nature of status in organizations, whereas other studies often treat status as a stable property - you have high status or you don't. The study also shows that the experience of status gains at work - typically viewed as completely positive - may be more complex than often assumed, Dumas said.

Dumas conducted the study with Tsedal Neeley, associate professor at the Harvard Business School. Their research appears online in the *Academy of Management Journal*, and will appear in a future print edition.

The study involved employees at an unnamed multibillion-dollar high-tech firm headquartered in Tokyo. English was named the company's official language a year before the study. In the announcement, the CEO stipulated that all employees would need to show sufficient skill with English (as measured by a test) within two years or be subject to demotion.

At the time of the announcement, only about 10 percent of the company's Japanese workforce had adequate English skills. About 5 percent of the company's workforce was native English speakers.

For the study, researchers led by Neeley interviewed 90 native English-speaking American employees of the company about their experiences and thoughts concerning how they were affected by the language mandate.

Dumas said that, before English was named the official language, the American employees generally felt lower in status than their Japanese counterparts, and perceived limitations to their opportunities for advancement in the company. After the announcement, the Americans saw their status rising within the company, but with some uncomfortable side effects.

"They thought 'I was nobody last week, but this week I'm somebody.' Their Japanese colleagues were now coming to them and asking them to read their memos before they sent them out, to make sure the English was proper. They were definitely enjoying that, but it was not a 100 percent positive feeling," Dumas said.

For one, they knew that this status boost was given to them - they didn't earn it - and they knew it could be taken away.

"There was a clear sense of a lack of control," Dumas said. "They couldn't tie this status boost to something they did. If you earn it, you feel some sense of control and certainty about your new position within the company, but they didn't have that."

In interviews with the researchers, the American employees also would occasionally take the perspective of their Japanese counterparts. They talked about how hard it must be for them and some wondered how they would have reacted if Japanese was named the official language.

In order to assuage their own guilt about this unearned status boost, many American employees rationalized about how this was actually good for the Japanese employees.

"They said things like 'this is really hard on them now, but learning English will be good for their careers,'" Dumas said. "The Americans were convincing themselves that their Japanese colleagues benefitted from the change as well."

While this study focused on a language mandate, Dumas said there are a lot of different ways that employees may find their status has changed within their company for reasons they didn't control.

"Steve Jobs elevated designers at Apple, somewhat at the expense of

engineers," Dumas said. "The work didn't necessarily change, but suddenly designers saw their value rise at Apple."

It could even be a less obvious change in status. A new manager may favor more introverted employees at his firm that more match his own style.

But whatever the reasons, managers should pay close attention to how changes in status affect all employees at their companies.

"Managers have to consider how changes will shape power and status dynamics and how people work together," Dumas said. "And they need to realize that even employees who have seen a boost in status may be experiencing some negative feelings about the change."

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