

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR FINAL – SPRING 2018

CASE: The Powerful Take All

Few situations generate as much frustration as having a supervisor steal your idea. Just ask Sophia Kim. She was an engineer working for a company that designs wearable insulin pumps for diabetics when she developed a very inexpensive and effective way to improve the design of one of the most significant components of the device. She was excited by her idea and couldn't wait to head up the development team. At least, she was excited until her boss told her she would play no part in rolling out the new product. Instead, her boss took the idea to the top executives alone.

The loss of control over intellectual property you have created is a common fear. In many workplaces, it is standard operating procedure to require employees to sign over their ideas to the organization. It is also common for supervisors to use their power to claim employee ideas for themselves. Due to resource dependence issues, it can be very difficult for employees to speak out and get their due.

What are the consequences of this kind of abuse of power? Some recent experimental evidence suggests fear of having ideas stolen decreases creativity. Orly Lobel and his colleague On Amir developed a virtual workplace and then put participants in one of two conditions. One group was told the members would be paid for the work they did but then would have to sign over their ideas to their virtual employers. The second group was not required to sign over their ideas. The study found those who lost ownership of their ideas reduced their concentration and effort on the task and made far more errors.

The question then arises—when supervisors appropriate employees' ideas, do they not consider the long-run effects of their political plays?

Sources: Based on O. Lobel "My Ideas, My Boss's Property" *New York Times*, April 13, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/14/opinion/my-ideas-my-bosss-property.html?_r=0; and J. Smith, "9 Things You Can Do When the Boss Takes Credit for Your Work," *Forbes*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2013/04/30/9-things-you-can-do-when-the-boss-takes-credit-for-your-work/>.

QUESTIONS:

1. What types of power and influence are organizations using when they require employees to sign over their creative rights to the company? Why are these tactics effective?
2. Do the results of the Lobel and Amir study fit with the ways the chapter describes employee reactions to organizational politics? Why or why not?
3. What are some ways a company might try to prevent supervisors from stealing employee ideas and damaging motivation?