Management Approach, Organisational Framework and Ineffective Communication Process in *The Devil Wears Prada*

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Abstract: This research paper examines the management approach, organizational framework and ineffective and hierarchical communication practice in Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* through the theoretical lenses of Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory. The novel provides a critical representation of authoritarian leadership, workplace competition, and the psychological costs of high-pressure corporate environments. By analysing key interactions between Miranda Priestly and her subordinates, this study explores how authoritarian management approach affects employee well-being, performance, and organizational culture. The paper argues that authoritarian leadership styles institutionalize ineffective communication practices that generate workplace stress, ambiguity, and psychological strain.

Keywords: Management approach, Organizational framework, Leadership style, Workplace communication, Media richness theory, *The Devil Wears Prada*

I. INTRODUCTION

Power dynamics in professional environments significantly impact workplace culture, employee morale, and overall productivity. Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* provides a compelling exploration of hierarchical structures, leadership styles, and their psychological effects on employees. The novel paints a vivid picture of a high-pressure industry where power is wielded not only through direct authority but also through social and material expectations.

This study examines the novel's portrayal of power imbalances at *Runway* magazine, focusing on Miranda Priestly's authoritarian leadership style and its consequences on subordinates, particularly Andrea Sachs. It also explores how employees internalize and react to hierarchical structures, either conforming to or resisting oppressive work cultures. The research applies Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory to analyse the novel's workplace interactions and their broader implications for organizational behaviour. By situating these themes within broader discussions on toxic workplace environments, employee well-being, and leadership ethics, this study highlights the lasting effects of dysfunctional corporate power structures on employees' mental health and career trajectories.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory, which together provide a comprehensive lens for examining leadership behaviour, communication practices, and employee experiences within organizational settings. From the management perspective, these theories are particularly suitable for analysing the workplace dynamics portrayed in *The Devil Wears Prada*, as they emphasize interpersonal relationships, communication effectiveness, and employee well-being.

2.1 Human Relations Theory

Human Relations Theory, developed by Elton Mayo through the Hawthorne Studies, emphasizes the role of social relationships, employee well-being, and interpersonal communication in enhancing organizational productivity. Unlike classical management theories that focus primarily on efficiency and financial incentives, it highlights recognition, belonging, and supportive leadership as key drivers of motivation and performance. Contemporary research continues to affirm the link between positive workplace relationships and

improved employee outcomes. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the theory provides a useful lens to analyse how Miranda Priestly's authoritarian leadership, emotional detachment, and lack of supportive communication contribute to employee stress, dissatisfaction, and disengagement within a rigid hierarchical structure.

2.2 Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory, proposed by Daft and Lengel (1986), explains that communication media vary in their capacity to convey information, or "richness," with face-to-face interaction being richer due to immediate feedback and multiple cues, and emails or brief phone calls being leaner and more suited to routine tasks. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the theory helps analyse Miranda Priestly's reliance on terse, ambiguous, and low-richness communication channels, which generate confusion, heighten stress, and reinforce hierarchical control, ultimately undermining employee well-being.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven textual analysis of Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* to examine power dynamics, leadership style, and organizational culture as represented in fictional workplace interactions. Through close reading of key scenes involving Miranda Priestly and her subordinates, the analysis applies Human Relations Theory to assess leadership behaviour and employee well-being, and Media Richness Theory to evaluate how communication channel choices influence clarity, stress, and workplace dynamics. Rather than producing empirical data, the study interprets the novel as a cultural text, aligning its representations with established organizational theories and relevant management research to illuminate how authoritarian leadership and ineffective communication foster toxic workplace environments.

IV. ANALYSIS OF MANAGEMENT APPROACH, ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND COMMUNICATION PROCESSES IN *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA*

4.1. Management Approach and Leadership style

Miranda Priestly exemplifies an authoritarian leadership style, marked by strict control, emotional detachment, and unrealistic expectations. She issues ambiguous commands without providing clear instructions, compelling subordinates to navigate challenging tasks with minimal guidance. According to Human Relations Theory, effective leadership requires fostering a supportive and communicative workplace environment, which Miranda fails to do (Mayo, 1933). Instead, her leadership cultivates a high-stress atmosphere where employees feel relentless pressure to meet unattainable standards, leading to burnout and dissatisfaction.

Miranda's directive to Andrea regarding her car and additional errands exemplifies her expectation for immediate compliance and lack of clear communication:

"Ahn-dre-ah! Ahn-dre-ah! Can you hear me, Ahn-dre-ah?" she trilled... "Where's my car? Did you drop it off at the garage yet? I need you to pick up Madelaine and drop her off at the apartment before you come back to the office." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 1)

This interaction demonstrates Miranda's failure to utilize rich communication mediums, as emphasized in Media Richness Theory. Instead of face-to-face interactions, which could provide immediate feedback and clarity, Miranda relies on terse phone calls that increase stress and uncertainty for her subordinates (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The lack of clear communication places undue burden on Andrea, who must interpret vague commands while under intense pressure.

Miranda's leadership style also fosters an unhealthy competitive atmosphere, leading to internalized pressure and rivalry rather than collaboration. Emily's hostility toward Andrea exemplifies this environment:

"You don't deserve this job. You're just the pity hire." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 4)

This statement illustrates how the scarcity mindset within *Runway* reinforces a culture of insecurity and aggression, aligning with Human Relations Theory's warning that excessive control and lack of emotional support led to deteriorating team cohesion (Mayo, 1933). Employees under Miranda's leadership do not experience a sense of belonging or support, causing them to prioritize individual survival over teamwork and innovation.

Furthermore, the absence of open dialogue and supportive feedback discourages employee growth and well-being. Research has demonstrated that authoritarian leadership, characterized by Miranda's behaviour, leads to negative workplace behaviours, reduced morale, and increased psychological distress among employees (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, studies have shown that poor communication from leaders results in decreased trust, higher workplace anxiety, and increased deviant behaviours (Zhang & Xie, 2017). The reliance on low-richness communication methods, as seen in Miranda's curt directives, further exacerbates these issues, as employees struggle to interpret instructions without sufficient contextual cues.

In conclusion, Miranda Priestly's centralized and authoritarian management approach in *The Devil Wears Prada* illustrates the detrimental effects of authoritarian leadership, particularly when analysed through Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory. The lack of clear communication, emotional detachment, and excessive competition create a toxic work environment that fosters stress and disengagement. To build healthier and more productive workplaces, leaders must balance authority with empathy, encourage open communication, and provide employees with the support needed to thrive.

4.2. Communication and Employee Well-Being

Miranda Priestly's communication style in *The Devil Wears Prada* is marked by terse directives and ambiguous instructions, creating a high-stress environment for her subordinates. Her preference for brief, often non-verbal cues leave assistants like Andrea Sachs to interpret her expectations without clear guidance. This aligns with Media Richness Theory, which posits that low-richness communication—lacking immediate feedback and multiple cues—hinders effective workplace interactions, resulting in misunderstandings and increased employee anxiety (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

A prime example is Miranda's ambiguous and abrupt directive:

"Get me Demarchelier." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 3)

This command, devoid of context, forces Andrea to decipher Miranda's intent, exemplifying how low-richness communication heightens stress and workplace inefficiency. Miranda's reliance on phone calls and clipped phrases further reduces the potential for meaningful interaction, a key aspect of Media Richness Theory, which argues that richer mediums—such as face-to-face communication—are better suited for complex, high-context exchanges.

Andrea's anxiety and stress due to unclear communication are vividly portrayed:

"Clutch, gas, shift (neutral to first? Or first to second?), release clutch," I repeated over and over in my head... Sweat trickled down my temple as I clutched the steering wheel, my pulse racing. (Weisberger, 2003, p. 1)

This scene illustrates how Miranda's unclear instructions exacerbate Andrea's stress, aligning with Human Relations Theory, which emphasizes that effective communication and supportive leadership are critical for employee well-being and productivity (Mayo, 1933). The absence of guidance and emotional support in Miranda's leadership style leads to increased psychological strain on her employees, further emphasizing how authoritarian leadership negatively impacts morale.

Miranda's leadership also fosters an environment devoid of empathy, where employees are treated as mere instruments for operational success. Andrea's growing frustration with *Runway*'s culture is evident when she reflects on her transformation:

"I look like them now. But I'm not one of them." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 7)

This internal conflict highlights the dissonance between Andrea's personal identity and the imposed organizational culture. According to Human Relations Theory, when employees experience such disconnects, their motivation and job satisfaction decrease, leading to disengagement and eventual turnover.

Furthermore, Miranda's emotionally detached leadership fosters a toxic work environment where constructive feedback and open dialogue are absent. This is exemplified when Andrea attempts to

balance her job responsibilities with her personal life:

"I'm sure your friend will understand. This is more important." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 1)

This interaction underscores how Miranda disregards Andrea's personal commitments, reflecting an authoritarian leadership style that prioritizes work over employee well-being. Human Relations Theory posits that fostering supportive relationships between employees and leaders enhances morale and productivity. However, Miranda's lack of concern for Andrea's well-being aligns with studies indicating that such leadership styles contribute to workplace stress, increased turnover, and lower job satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2017).

Empirical research supports these observations, demonstrating that authoritarian leadership and poor communication contribute to employee cynicism and burnout. For example, studies have found that unclear directives and lack of supportive leadership increase workplace anxiety and reduce overall performance (Jiang et al., 2017; Li & Sun, 2015). Similarly, when employees feel undervalued and struggle to interpret managerial expectations, they experience higher levels of dissatisfaction and disengagement.

In summary, Miranda Priestly's communication approach in the novel exemplifies how low-richness communication and authoritarian leadership, as examined through Media Richness Theory and Human Relations Theory, detrimentally impact employee well-being. The lack of direct feedback, emotionally detached interactions, and an absence of empathy create a toxic work environment that fosters stress, ambiguity, and reduced morale.

4.3. Organizational framework and Hierarchical Control

The novel underscores how materialism serves as a tool for maintaining hierarchical structures. Expensive clothing and accessories symbolize success and compliance, reinforcing the notion that employees must adhere to *Runway's* rigid standards. According to Human Relations Theory, a positive workplace culture should foster employee well-being, collaboration, and open communication

(Mayo, 1933). However, *Runway* prioritizes external appearances over employee welfare, reflecting an organization where materialism is leveraged as a means of enforcing control rather than fostering inclusivity and motivation.

Andrea's realization that she "looks like them but is not one of them" signifies her growing awareness of the superficiality governing *Runway's* culture. The following passage highlights how material objects function as markers of status and control:

"Shit! Another pair of seven-hundred-dollar shoes sacrificed to my complete and utter lack of grace under pressure… My fingers left wet streaks across the supple suede that swathed the tops of my now numb thighs." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 1)

This moment exemplifies how adherence to *Runway's* materialistic standards comes at a cost, both financially and psychologically. Andrea's frustration aligns with Human Relations Theory's perspective that employee satisfaction is linked to emotional well-being rather than external validation through material possessions. The rigid expectations within *Runway* create a work culture in which employees equate professional success with the ability to maintain appearances rather than actual job performance.

Furthermore, Miranda's obsession with perfection extends beyond professional tasks to trivial matters, further reinforcing her authoritarian leadership and materialistic control:

"Miranda doesn't like the wrapping paper they use. I gave them this white paper last year, but they just didn't look as nice as when we do it." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 4)

This emphasis on seemingly inconsequential details reflects a broader power structure that thrives on reinforcing arbitrary expectations. Media Richness Theory suggests that communication within organizations should align with the complexity of the message being conveyed (Daft & Lengel, 1986). However, Miranda's fixation on minutiae without clearly articulating their significance creates an environment of ambiguity and stress. Instead of facilitating open communication that fosters understanding, her rigid demands force employees to internalize hierarchical expectations without

question, reinforcing a culture of compliance and subordination.

Studies have demonstrated that environments driven by materialism and authoritarian control can negatively impact employee morale and engagement. Research shows that organizations that emphasize extrinsic values—such as appearance and prestige—over intrinsic employee well-being often experience higher stress levels and lower productivity (Kasser et al., 2004). Employees working under such conditions struggle to find meaning in their work, leading to increased disengagement and burnout.

In conclusion, *The Devil Wears Prada* illustrates how materialism reinforces hierarchical control by setting unrealistic expectations for employees. Through the lens of Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory, it is evident that *Runway's* materialistic culture prioritizes external validation over employee well-being, fostering a toxic work environment characterized by ambiguity, stress, and hierarchical domination. Organizations that fail to balance professional expectations with emotional support risk fostering disengagement and high turnover rates, ultimately harming long-term effectiveness and employee morale.

4.4. Employee Resistance and Organizational Change

Andrea's resignation represents a rejection of authoritarian management approach at Runway and her decision to prioritize personal well-being over professional validation aligns with Human Relations Theory, which advocates for employee-centric leadership and a workplace culture that values individual growth, collaboration, and job satisfaction (Mayo, 1933). By quitting, Andrea challenges the notion that professional success must come at the cost of personal identity and emotional health, demonstrating the importance of workplace environments that support employee well-being.

Andrea's resistance reaches its peak when she finally asserts herself against Miranda's authority:

"You know what, Miranda? I don't care if I'm letting you down. I'm done." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 17)

This moment underscores the psychological strain created by Miranda's authoritarian leadership. Human Relations Theory posits that employees thrive in environments where they feel valued and respected, rather than controlled and emotionally drained. Andrea's departure signifies her refusal to accept the hierarchical power dynamics that suppress individuality and well-being.

Miranda's use of employees as mere tools to execute her demands is evident when she forces Andrea to deliver a humiliating message to a chef:

"I had no idea what to say or do... I felt like crying when she ordered me to tell him that he would never be a real chef anywhere besides some second-rate steak emporium, but I had done it." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 9)

This scene exemplifies the dehumanization of employees under Miranda's control. Instead of fostering open and constructive communication, as recommended by Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), Miranda relies on indirect and emotionally harmful messages that create stress and conflict. The lack of direct, supportive dialogue reinforces a culture of fear and compliance, preventing employees from developing confidence or autonomy in their roles.

Additionally, Miranda's dominance extends beyond the workplace, encroaching on Andrea's personal life. When Miranda dismisses Andrea's prior commitments with friends, she exerts an unwarranted level of control over her assistant's autonomy:

"I'm sure your friend will understand. This is more important." (Weisberger, 2003, p. 1)

This interaction highlights the blurred boundaries between professional obligations and personal well-being. Media Richness Theory suggests that complex and emotionally charged discussions require rich communication channels, such as face-to-face interactions, to ensure mutual understanding and respect (Daft & Lengel, 1986). However, Miranda's use of terse and impersonal communication strips away any opportunity for negotiation or discussion, reinforcing a hierarchical structure where employees must obey without question.

Andrea's ultimate rejection of *Runway's* culture signifies her triumph over the toxic system she was once a part of. By resigning, she asserts her independence and recognizes that true success does not come from conforming to unrealistic expectations. Her decision reflects the broader implications of Human Relations Theory, emphasizing the need for organizations to foster positive and employee-centric cultures to maintain productivity and morale (Mayo, 1933). Studies have shown that toxic leadership and rigid hierarchical control often lead to increased job dissatisfaction, higher turnover rates, and long-term harm to employee engagement (Wang et al., 2021).

In conclusion, Andrea's departure from *Runway* serves as a testament to the power of employee agency in resisting toxic workplace cultures. Through the lenses of Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory, her story highlights the importance of effective communication, supportive leadership, and the necessity for organizations to prioritize employee well-being over rigid, materialistic standards. Businesses that fail to recognize these elements risk cultivating environments where productivity is overshadowed by stress and dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to diminished long-term success.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The portrayal of power dynamics in *The Devil Wears Prada* highlights the detrimental effects of authoritarian leadership and management style at workplace cultures. The novel serves as a critique of high-pressure corporate environments that prioritize control over employee well-being. By integrating Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory, this study underscores the need for leadership models that balance authority with empathy, foster open communication, and prioritize collaboration over competition. Organizations that fail to address these issues risk perpetuating stress, employee dissatisfaction, and high turnover rates.

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