

# **The Influence of Corporate Status Symbols in (today's) Leadership Perception**

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## **Summary**

- Research questions:** Are status symbols a barrier to intrinsic equality within the organisation?
- Methods:** Quantitative research approach using an anonymous online survey developed and adapted to the research topic, which was published and accessible to economically active individuals with work experience.
- Results:** This research highlights the potential negative impact of status symbols on an employee's intrinsic equality and consequently employee motivation. The research provides value for organisations as it shows that they need to analyse how the perceived equality in their organisational environment is impacted by status symbols.
- Structure of the article:** Introduction; Literature Review; Research Questions & Methods; Empirical Results; Conclusions; About the Author; Bibliography

## Introduction

Today, all humans are considered as equals, thus entitled to the same rights, despite different genders, cultural background, race, sexual orientation and class. However, throughout the history of humanity, strictly defined classes were implemented as the norm in social routines (between man and woman, master and slave, native and foreigner). Nowadays, equality has become a strong principle that guides social and political thought as well as individual behaviour within organisational environments (Stuurman, 2017, pp. 1–2).

An organisation is a recognisably hierarchical system that is ruled by managerial ideologies and common understandings of work, backed up by organisational cultures and human resource principles and procedures (Ospina, 1996, p. 159). When analysing inequality in the workplace, it is possible to identify how wage disparities, job segregation and hierarchies of power are regulated (Sobering, 2019, p. 544). Such models allow considerable disparities and ignore how invisible walls affect the social environment in the workplace while supporting a visible competition for rewards, which leads to internal conflicts (Ospina, 1996). Despite a status-levelling trend being recognised in the organisations (Morand & Shang, 2018), it is still possible to identify status symbols that radiate the hierarchical level and authority that some organisational members possess. In addition to the hierarchic distribution, these can be identified as private parking spaces, private offices, luxurious company cars, forms of address and dress codes; these symbols provide an objective interpretation of the shared reality in the workplace (Morand, 2010).

Some authors claim that reserved parking spaces, corner offices and manager-only business class flights, are no longer adapted to the new work approaches aimed at increasing and maintaining employees' intrinsic motivation (Minnaar & Moree, 2020). This research focuses on the potential effects of such symbols and how they might play an important role on the direct interaction between leaders and followers.

One fundamental rule was established by Carney and Gets (2009) for organisations that place employees first. This rule was recognised as the equal treatment between employees, with the organisation's leadership being solely responsible for eradicating any elements that go against it. Research (van den Bos,

2001) has also supported the fact that justice coupled with fairness norms and values are a fundamental characteristic. Fair treatment plays a significant role on how individuals are motivated (Pfeffer, 1995).

To the author's knowledge, there is no empirical research that has analysed the influence or role of status symbols in the perceived intrinsic equality of employees. According to the field research of Carney and Gets (Carney & Gets, 2009, p. 89), there is no empirical confirmation that distinctive status symbols in the workplace are a barrier to individual employees' intrinsic equality. This article aspires to answer the research question focusing on the effect that such symbols have on employees' perception of distributive justice, and if these distinctive symbols clash with their intrinsic equality:

*Are status symbols a barrier to intrinsic equality within the organisation?*

Two main sections head this article. The literature review in the first section links the elements of status symbols to fairness principles and leadership approaches. The second is the empirical part, in which an evaluation of the status symbols as a barrier to intrinsic equality will be evaluated through analysing the results of an online questionnaire developed to fit the research topic.

## Literature Review

### Background to Status Symbols

Why are status symbols part of the organisational environment? Their presence is understood in the evaluation of the evolution of any social species, Humans included, in which hierarchical structures are fundamental for the mechanics of social interaction and development (Qu & Dreher, 2018), with a status seeking behaviour being deeply embedded in our species (Loch et al., 2001).

Typical hierarchical structures found in the social environment of animal species are complex systems developed through diverse social encounters; individuals that were psychologically and physically fittest, were provided a status of dominance within their group (Vervaecke & Stevens, 2019). Such elements and attitudes can also be found in the organisational social

environment, where striving for status is customary (Loch et al., 2001). Humans went beyond the symbols that were intrinsic to the physique and skills of the individual, and started to use intangible representations of status achievement. These representations are culturally bound and have specific meaning within the culture in which they are integrated, providing behavioural guidance to its members and external stakeholders (Ashkanasy et al., 2000).

An organisation is also, in its essence, an extension of the society in which it is integrated, with status symbols thus forming a natural part of its social construct (Ashkanasy et al., 2000). Systems of status in the workplace are said to be incited by differential requirements, interests and skills of the individuals in the organisation, and not always linked with a negative connotation of social differentiation (Barnard, 1946), as in the case of work group specialisation. When it comes to employee compensation, organisations use differentiating motivating methods linked to the corporate status ladder, which have historically favoured management elites, whose main focus is related to the organisational strategy, while treating workers responsible for task execution differently (Morand & Shang, 2018). These compensation schemes are not suited in team environments, as research suggests (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006).

Organisations that practise the approach of distinguishing between employees with symbols of status and corporate achievement tend to associate them with motivational objectives to drive employee productivity and engagement. Upfront about such win-lose situations, there seems to exist an opportunity to enjoy certain rewards within the organisation (Morand, 2010; Ospina, 1996). With the right organisational environment, such status distinctions might allow the opportunity for eliciting social comparisons (Ghadi, 2018) which will lead to competition between employees within the organisation; the primitive human brain can be responsible for these actions of greed, due to instincts to fight for survival and gaining important resources (Loch et al., 2001).

### **Status Symbols**

What can be defined and understood as status symbols? The literature describes symbols as “objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke

emotions and impel men to action” (Cohen, 1976, 1974, p. 23), and corporate status symbols as “public representations of organisational theory-in-use to which individuals can refer” (Gagliardi, 1990, p. 17). They represent extrinsic work values that focus on the consequences and outcomes of work (Twenge et al., 2010). Physical or psychological symbols can be easily grasped by corporate actors, the interpretation of which takes individual past experiences into account (Shang & Morand, 2014).

Examples of organisations that have embraced an egalitarian structure that does not provide individual performance incentives, special access to information to certain employees and does not have restricted areas for managers are known and can be found in the organisational environment (Minnaar & Moree, 2020).

Forms of address and lofty job titles are one form of symbols of status. General forms of address are normally used by individuals to transmit a positive image to the surrounding world. When high levels of politeness are used (Morand, 1996), this can have a positive effect (closer cooperation/relationship amongst individuals) or negative effect (avoidance of individuals). The forced use of such positive and negative politeness depends on the social status (Morand, 1996) and power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010) between the interacting persons, imposing a clearly defined gap/distance amongst colleagues. The establishment of a power structure between individuals is a barrier for relationship development; it will transmit differences of skills and education within the organisation (Carney & Gets, 2009, p. 162), thus hindering open communication between individuals (Morand, 1996). To openly communicate on a first name basis, for example, will be perceived as a reduction of the power gap between leaders and followers and improve job satisfaction (individuals are brought closer together, despite the surrounding work environment) (Morand, 1996).

Formal attire has been customarily used by higher-ranking employees, with a casual dress code used by employees in lower hierarchical ranks (Morand, 2010). In recent years, this symbol of high-ranked employees has become obsolete as top managers in high-tech organisations have adopted casual attire that fits the environment, engaging a non-conforming behaviour regarding the traditional norm of suits and ties (Bellessa et al., 2015). This trend is contributing to the differentiation reduction between personnel and is

playing a positive role in narrowing the hierarchy gap (Shang & Morand, 2014).

The differentiation of the organisational space according to hierarchical distinctions is one of the most widely adopted status symbols in the corporate world (Morand, 2010). Organisations that want to transmit a commitment towards an egalitarian culture know that differential access to specific places within the organisation is the first thing to avoid (Elsbach & Bechky, 2007). In the architectural arrangements of company premises, it is possible to find segregated facilities (some with an upper-class environment) such as reserved parking spaces, specific lunch and washrooms for executives, specific building entrances, individual offices (the size of which increases depending on the hierarchical level) and segregated meeting rooms for high-level corporate members, thus separating managers from their teams (Shang & Morand, 2014, pp. 975–976; Baldry, 1997; Graça, 2000). Some authors (Carney & Gets, 2009, p. 89) went further to say that doors can also be categorised as status symbols.

Perquisites or perks, as they are commonly known, are extra benefits provided by organisations to employees in exchange for their corporate engagement. They play a practical role in the company strategy in employee retention and talent attraction (Morand, 2010). Some examples are company cars for professional and private use, mobile phones and laptop computers, business class travel only for management, health insurance policies, special retirement plans, stock options and bonus plans (Morand, 2010). Some items can be considered as standard for most companies and not perceived as symbols of status, since they are important mobility work tools for employees. However, attributing different models and brands to management and employees, as hierarchical rewards (Greenberg, 1988), transmits an aura of prestige and differentiation within the company (Gagliardi, 1990, p. 8). When defining such reward structures, care should be taken to distinguish between the valuation of such elements as material rewards and signs and elements of status in order to avoid segregating employees (Barnard, 1946).

### **Justice Rules and the Organisational Social Environment**

How does the existence of status symbols within the organisational culture affect its social

environment? To first understand this influence, it is relevant to discuss theories of justice and fairness and concentrate on the known justice concepts within the social environment that are influenced by the existence of symbols of status.

Symbols of status influence justice and fairness values (considered to be global values that are relevant in organisational environments) (Agle & Caldwell, 1999, p. 353), as overall fairness perceptions drive employees' attitudes and behaviours (Lind, 2007). This has been empirically confirmed by the existence of status-levelling approaches in organisations, i.e. lack of status symbols, which has shown a positive impact on employees' work attitudes (Shang & Morand, 2014).

To comprehend the reasoning behind a potential lack of employee motivation or workplace affection, justice and fairness cannot be ignored. The ideology of the fairness heuristic theory suggests that in new situations where fairness is at stake, individuals proceed with associations of fairness from their past experiences, hence fairness is also considered a global value linked to motivational factors in organisations (van den Bos, 2001).

If an individual perceives his/her leader to be unfair towards a colleague, the leader will be associated with this unfair situation in the future, even though this person has no other past experiences with this leader. A similar association can be made with the presence of symbols of status in the workplace. A basic concept in justice and fairness theories is the fact that reward allocation has to balance the interests of all parties (Wade et al., 2006).

A modest example can be provided to support this assumption. A benefit is considered as a status symbol when leaders take advantage of it; a barrier towards equality feelings amongst those employees positioned in a lower hierarchy is thus established. Upon this perception, the organisational members will develop assumptions concerning the leadership of the organisation itself (van den Bos, 2001). Empirical research has shown that feelings of injustice perceived by individuals in an organisation, as created by implemented procedures and processes, are a major employee concern (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006).

Lind (2007) has identified that the perception of fairness and justice moderates the level of personal engagement in the organisation and work teams. An empirical study by Colquitt and Jackson (2006)

concerning justice in teams revealed that one-third of the total sample shared concerns over any form of injustice, thus underlining the importance of an equality environment in enhancing collaboration and dedication amongst team members; in team settings, an equality level “is the only way everyone will trust one another” (Davids et al., 2019, p. 31).

Considering that an organisational structure is a team, where all members work towards the same objective, it can be assumed that physical and psychological signs of hierarchical differences and position will draw an inequalitarian environment. Authors have acknowledged that such an environment will enhance the perception of “second-class feelings” by the subordinates (Morand, 2010). Inequity is a relevant source of psychological tension within an organisation (Goodman & Friedman, 1971), which highlights negative feelings perceived by the organisational members. In addition to the previously mentioned inequality and subjective perceptions of fairness regarding the privileged treatment of others, feelings of frustration, inferiority, exclusion, mental states of competition and even envy were related (Carney & Gets, 2009; Gets, 2009; Kuźma et al., 2019; Smith et al., 1999).

The reality of an unjust environment goes against the first of the three human needs defined by Carnet and Gets (Carney & Gets, 2009, pp. 132–134), developers of the Freedom Movement. It is based on the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and their qualitative research in social corporate environments. Carney and Gets (2009) identified these human needs as intrinsic equality, growth and self-direction, which are considered to be the environment’s nutrients that foster the important intrinsic motivation of the individual.

As expressed by Gets, “the surest way of preventing a person from becoming self-motivated is to deny the satisfaction of personal needs” (Gets, 2009). Studies focused on the influences of status-levelling symbols have concluded that such levelling has positively influenced job satisfaction and affective commitment in the workplace (Shang & Morand, 2014). When employees perceive an equalitarian environment, they will adapt their behaviour to it, transforming the dynamics of their attitudes towards others (Morand, 2010), which is fundamental in high-performance organisations.

Organisational justice can be summarised as a personal evaluation of the moral behaviour from the members of an organisation (Van der Bank et al, 2010). Considering the fact that inequity is a source of psychological tension within an organisation, one has to understand that this tension is created by a duality of fairness perceptions in the organisation (Goodman & Friedman, 1971). This contrast can be found in the case of symbols of status. The enjoyment of these elements by individuals will alter their fairness perceptions, thus being instrumental in any given situation to select the justice rule that will benefit them the most (Cropanzano et al., 2015). Here, it is relevant to highlight the basic concept in justice and fairness theories that the reward allocation has to balance the interests of all parties involved (Wade et al., 2006).

There are three known justice rules. These are procedural justice, which considers rules related to decision processes, interactional justice, which focuses on interpersonal treatment, and distributive justice, referring to rules related to allocated outcomes (Gollwitzer & van Prooijen, 2016). Of these three, it has been shown that the distributive justice rule has a stronger effect than procedural justice regarding the mediation of justice in perceptions of overall fairness in an organisational environment (Jones & Martens, 2009). Another study (Cojuharenco & Patient, 2013) based on interviews with employees of several companies to identify fair and unfair events concluded that employees are more likely to focus on distributive justice and not consider the other two types of justice norms/rules. The relevance of the role of this rule to the topic of symbols of status is considerable, since this rule supports the interpretation of reward distribution in organisations. Despite disagreements concerning the distributive justice rules, it seems that four principles are accepted by researchers (Traub & Kittel, 2020, p. 93), these being equality, equity, need and entitlement (Deutsch, 1975; Traub & Kittel, 2020).

The equality principle hypothesises that all individuals should receive the same rewards, no matter what their contribution (Deutsch, 1975), and it is the preferred principle to ensure high levels of motivation and task performance (Leventhal, 1980).

Contrasting with the equality principle, the equity proposition is based on the notion that the reward of individuals should be determined according to their relative contribution (Deutsch, 1975).

The next distributive principle to be highlighted is the entitlement principle. This principle determines that outcomes, whether positive or negative, should be distributed to individuals based on specific characteristics, such as social origins, race or gender, but also on acquired status. This rule differs from the equity rule by attributing the benefits or burdens without taking into account the contribution or effort of a person (Hülle et al., 2018; Traub & Kittel, 2020).

The last relevant distributive principle is need. It suggests that the specific needs of individuals should be used as a base to split/distribute the outcomes (Deutsch, 1975). In the organisational world, this rule is less relevant for reward distribution or elimination of status symbols. It is mainly taken into account for the specific individual needs within the organisation that are important for the execution of the most diverse work tasks, as is the case of employee training (Croppansano et al., 2015).

The equity rule is based on the observation that individuals evaluate their rewards according to their relative contribution (Croppansano et al., 2015). Several theorists (Eisenstein, 2011; Morand & Merriman, 2012) link the dysfunctional and unequal global financial system practices to the equity principle, which is the dominant justice rule in corporations (Ospina, 1996). This dysfunction is linked with the abusive approach taken by certain corporate world organisations, while selecting the equity rule for their reward system with the intention of validating highly disparate salaries and perks received by members of the management board and employees. Organisations where such differentiation exists tend to have a status-based culture. Since such status symbols are linked with distributive inequality, this has led some authors to name the equity distribution rule the “unfair distribution rule” (Morand & Merriman, 2012) (Meindl, 1989).

Unfair treatment of employees will result in negative emotions, which will lead to a negative impact in organisational performance; decrease in productivity, absenteeism, lower self-confidence, lack of cooperation between teams, general dissatisfaction are a few of the negative outcomes (Ledimo, 2015). Successful organisations have implemented a symbolic egalitarianism, removing differentiation and symbols of status, thus transmitting the intrinsic value of the employees in their organisation (Minnaar & Moree, 2020).

## Leadership

To understand the liaison between symbols of status in organisations and the central role of the leader, two important leadership concepts are elucidated that have principles of eradicating symbols of status in the workplace at their core.

The link between systems of status and the development of rigid organisational structures resistant to change was debated in early research (Barnard, 1946). Already in the theoretical review within *Functions and Pathology of Status Symbols in Formal Organisations* (Barnard, 1946), it was associated with organisational rigidity towards change, which ultimately leads to the premature downfall of organisations, and with the competitive environment sustained by the short-term status-seeking ambitions of organisational teams. Recognising the destructive effects of status symbols, some leadership theories have been developed and idealised, with status-levelling approaches in their focal points. Concepts such as the Liberating Leadership movement (Gets, 2009, 2011) and the Servant-Leadership Theory (Greenleaf, 1977; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002) hold leaders responsible for the eradication of discriminatory symbols and promote fairness in their organisation (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2018). This equality environment promotes the elimination of segregated symbols of status, and the physical and psychological proximity between the leader and the followers (Lamertz, 2002) will close the gap between leaders and subordinates (Minnaar & Moree, 2020). This attitude develops the perception by employees that they are amongst equals, enabling the development of trust-based relationships. The creation and maintenance of such a company culture with equality in its focus falls under the responsibility of the leadership (Abdolvand et al., 2008).

The Liberating Leadership movement results from years of field investigations led by Brian Carney and Isaac Gets in specific companies with an organisational culture promoting employee responsibility, thus allowing them the freedom to take their own initiative and actions for the benefit of the organisation (Carney & Gets, 2009; Gets, 2009, 2011). These are called freedom-form companies, or just F-form (Gets, 2009, 2011). Based on the Self-Determination Theory fundamentals (Deci & Ryan,

2000), the field research of Carney and Gets went further, suggesting that progressive companies such as these have mastered creating a nourishing environment for intrinsic equality, as one of the basic needs for individual motivation (Carney & Gets, 2009, pp. 132–134). Leaders have a crucial role to play in sharing and maintaining the liberating company culture. This includes a positive attitude towards “remov[ing] all the status symbols and practices that prevent your people from feeling intrinsically equal” (Carney & Gets, 2009, xii).

The Servant-Leadership approach was originally developed by Robert Greenleaf. He intended to create an organisational structure focused on the ethical and nourishing environment in which people flourish. The main focus of the servant leader is to serve the follower (Greenleaf, 1977). It has been claimed that servant leadership is beyond a leadership style, elevating it to an attitudinal disposition, a worldview which integrates and uses a variety of styles of leadership (Horsman, 2018, p. 99), with a strong focus on the human side of the enterprise (Davis, 2017, p. 78).

Certain characteristics are required of the servant leader, such as a strong moral compass, relentless personal integrity and humility, and a dedicated focus on the follower’s intrinsic needs and growth (Peterson et al., 2012; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The bottom line is that servant leaders will not view leadership as a status symbol (rejecting social upgrading systems that destroy the community), which constitutes a major difference between transformational leaders and servant leaders (Smith et al., 2004).

Status symbols serve to separate leaders from followers; refusing such privileges and perks, and acknowledging they are barriers to the well-being of the community is intrinsic to the life of service provided to their followers and the happiness that comes with it (Laub, 2018).

Therefore, the author understands that status symbols do not have a place under this leadership philosophy, nor do they comply with its values.

## Research Questions & Methods

It can be argued that theoretical research related to distributive justice rules and elements of

status in the workplace supports the negative effect of such symbols regarding the workplace interactions between leaders and followers. Morand (2010) and Shang & Morand (2014) have noted a positive link between employee work attitudes and the lack of status symbols in the workplace. The fieldwork of Carney and Gets (2009) supported the cross-status cooperation and the communication improvement throughout organisations when such elements of status are disregarded by the leaders and a status-free culture is implemented.

Since the existence of intrinsic equality is fundamental to the attainment of a motivational environment, it is questionable to integrate elements of status in the workplace that form a barrier towards employees’ intrinsic equality. The research conducted by Carney & Gets (2009, p. 32) has suggested intrinsic equality as one of the fundamental elements to enhance the intrinsic motivation of employees. Taking this effect into consideration, the following research question is formulated:

*Are status symbols a barrier to intrinsic equality within the organisation?*

This research question aims to determine the link between the existence of symbols of status and feelings of inequality through the following hypothesis:

*There is a significant correlation between the existence of status symbols and inequality feelings.*

## Methodology

To test the hypothesis, a quantitative research approach is considered, using an anonymous online survey in order to allow the author to collect the required empirical information, to help answer the research hypothesis. The survey was developed after a comprehensive literature review process. Apart from the control questions used to determine the sample's characteristics, the survey includes five statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale (scale values: strongly agree (5); partially agree (4); neither agree nor disagree (3); partially disagree (2); strongly disagree (1)). Each of the statements reflects a different feeling or cognition that can be perceived by the individual who is confronted with differentiation of benefits (symbols of status) in the workplace due to a contrast in hierarchical positions (upward social comparisons) (Kuźma et al., 2019). The proximity and connection between individuals regarding a specific event is a central topic for the analysis of inequality (Barford, 2017), hence the link with the "second-class" feelings perceived by the survey participants. In the literature review, a set of five cognitions and feelings was identified, which are represented by five individual statements. The first statement "*It somehow doesn't seem fair that some people deserve more than others*" links a subjective perception of justice towards another person's advantage (Smith et al., 1999). In a second statement "*It is frustrating to see some people more benefited than others*", the feeling of frustration is considered (Smith et al., 1999). The third statement contemplates exclusion with the following wording "*I feel excluded in comparison to those with more benefits*" (Kuźma et al., 2019). The fourth statement includes inferiority (Smith et al., 1999) "*I feel inferior when compared to those with more benefits*". For the fifth and final perception, which results from differentiation of benefits and is a direct result of a social upward comparison and can lead to competitive states (Kuźma et al., 2019; Smith et al., 1999), the statement is as follows: "*I strive to have the privileges of a higher position*". The survey also took into consideration a set of statements based on the study by Shang and Morand (2014) regarding the connection of an organisational setting with low predominance of status symbols and employee attitudes. Here a 5-point Likert-type scale is used (scale values: always (4); very often (3); sometimes (2); rarely (1); never (0)) to identify the level of frequency of status symbols in the organisation as a

whole. This set of statements additionally aimed to engage the participant in a visualisation exercise for their own organisation.

## Population

The targeted population comprises economically active individuals (men, woman and agender people) who already have work experience and are currently employed or unemployed (long or short-term).

## Descriptive Statistics

A total of 164 respondents successfully completed the survey, with 78 participants answering in English and 86 in Portuguese. In the English version, one respondent's questionnaire was discarded due to lack of working experience (student), and in the Portuguese version, two questionnaires were discarded due to their incompleteness. In total, the sample is constituted by 161 participants (N = 161), of whom 77 used the English translation and 84 the Portuguese translation. From the final sample, almost sixty per cent of the participants were male (n = 94) and the rest were female (n = 67).



Table 1  
Demographic information (N = 161) (self-tailored structure)

	1946 - 1964		1965 - 1976		1977 - 1995		1996 onward	
	n = 21	13.0 %	n = 40	24.8 %	n = 96	59.6 %	n = 4	2.5 %
Gender								
Male	10	50.0	24	60.0	59	61.0	1	25
Female	11	50.0	16	40.0	37	39.0	3	75
Total	21	100	40	100	96	100	4	100

## Empirical results

### Symbols of Status

Table 2 is representative of the survey participants' perception of the surrounding symbols of status (hierarchy, physical and psychological symbols) in the organisation of reference. Within this sample (N = 161), it is possible to identify that high hierarchical managers can be distinguished from other employees by the formality used to address them ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), distinctive attire ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ), private offices ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), exclusive accesses to specific locations ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and through differentiating benefits ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

A computed variable with SPSS represents the aggregation of the five individual survey questions

(Total Status Symbols) that represent symbols of status. The computed variable *Total Status Symbols* determines the overall frequency with which high hierarchical members are distinguished in the organisation ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). This aggregated variable denotes the frequency of the sample to lie in the frequency scale between Very Often and Sometimes. For the same variable, skewness of  $s = -0.30$  implies a distribution with inclination to the right, and a kurtosis  $k = -0.43$  denotes a flatter distribution nearer to the normal distribution. When taking into consideration the hierarchical element as a status symbol, it is possible to generate the composed variable *Total Status Symbols and Hierarchy* ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) with  $s = -0.66$  and  $k = 0.09$ .

Table 2  
Hierarchy level, Status symbol perception (N = 161)  
Scale values: always (4) ; very often (3); sometimes (2); rarely (1); never (0)

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Hierarchy	3.99	1.11	-0.76	-0.48
Status Symbols				
Formality while addressing	2.53	1.22	-0.55	-0.65
Distinctive attire	2.35	1.06	-0.37	-0.24
Private offices	2.43	1.31	-0.53	-0.83
Exclusive access	2.24	1.32	-0.36	-1.01
Differentiating benefits	2.56	1.29	-0.67	-0.57
Total Status Symbols*	2.42	0.92	-0.30	-0.43
Total Status Symbols and Hierarchy*	3.21	0.75	-0.66	0.09

Note. \*Computed variable

**Hypothesis Testing**

The defined hypothesis “*There is a significant correlation between the existence of status symbols and inequality feelings*” proposes a significant correlation between symbols of status in an organisation and the individual perception of inequality feelings. The survey explores this rationale, requiring participants to grade their agreement with a series of statements in order to stimulate emotional responses regarding a comment that implies a distributive differentiation.

Exploring the results reported in Table 3, it is relevant to point out the importance regarding an equal distribution of non-monetary benefits of the sample ( $M$

$= 2.70; SD = 1.09$ ), where the statistic curve distribution has a tendency to be normal and flat ( $s = 0.09, k = -0.64$ ). When analysing the results obtained by the series of statements, one identifies the propensity of the sample to perceive competitive attitudes ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.18$ ) and frustration as emotional responses ( $M = 3.43, SD = 1.30$ ), both variables being neither positively correlated nor significant ( $r = .074, p = .352$ ). The holders of the lowest means are manifestation of exclusion ( $M = 2.55, SD = 1.17$ ) and inferiority ( $M = 2.23, SD = 1.23$ ); both variables are positively correlated and significant ( $r = .591, p < .01$ ).

Table 3  
*Importance of equal distribution and agreement towards emotional responses enhanced by unequal distribution (N = 161) (self-tailored structure)*  
*Scale values: strongly agree (5); partially agree (4); neither agree nor disagree (3); partially disagree (2); strongly disagree (1)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Agreement towards negative emotional responses and uneven distribution				
(1) Fair	3.10	1.27	0.05	-0.97
(2) Frustration	3.43	1.30	-0.42	-0.88
(3) Exclusion	2.55	1.17	.0.30	-0.80
(4) Inferiority	2.23	1.23	0.69	-0.59
(5) Competition	3.65	1.18	-0.66	-0.33
(1, 2, 3, 4, 5) Feelings*	2.99	0.77	0.07	-0.25

Note. \*Computed variable

When analysing the skewness and kurtosis of the different distributions, in terms of skewness frustration ( $s = -0.42$ ) and competition ( $s = -0.66$ ), one observes an inclination to the right, while fairness ( $s = 0.05$ ), exclusion ( $s = 0.30$ ) and inferiority ( $s = 0.30$ ) show a tendency to the left. Regarding the kurtosis of the sample, all elements demonstrate a flatter distribution (negative values). The composed variable generated in SPSS, which comprises the five emotional responses targeted by the survey, demonstrates a rather central distribution of the sample ( $M = 2.99, SD = 0.77$ ) with an inclination to the left ( $s = 0.07$ ) and somewhat flat ( $k = -0.25$ ).

The next association of this hypothesis requires two variables. The first variable is taken from the set of

statements that highlights organisational status symbols, where the frequency determination of such elements in the participants’ known environment was ranked (Table 2). The second variable is provided by the statements that highlighted the existence of inequality feelings bolstered by an unequal distributive environment (Table 3).

To perform the statistical correlation between the variables and to test the hypothesis, a Pearson’s correlation analysis is implemented. For this approach, the composed variable linked to the status symbols is determined as the independent variable. The composed variable related to the inequality feelings is determined as the dependent variable. The results of the Pearson’s correlation analysis are disclosed in Table 4.

Table 4

*Pearson's correlation (N = 161)*

	M	SD		
Symbols of status*	2.42	0.92	1	.258**
Inequality feelings*	2.99	0.77	.258**	1

Note:

\*Computed variable

\*\*Correlation significant with  $p < .01$  (2-tailed)

A sample of 161 participants identified their perception regarding elements of status in their working environment ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) and negative feelings in a distributive differentiation scenario ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Pearson's  $r$  data analysis revealed a statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) and positive correlation ( $r = .258$ ). It can be confirmed that individuals who

ranked a high perception towards symbols of status in the workplace also reported high levels of agreement regarding emotional responses enhanced by distributive differentiation. It can be concluded that the hypothesis "There is a significant correlation between the existence of status symbols and inequality feelings" is supported.

## Conclusions

This research aims to assess the influence of status elements in the workplace, social environment and leadership perception. Those who are hierarchically higher enjoy a different position in the perception of others. The symbols highlight the vertical difference in the corporate ladder, which may or may not influence the surrounding environment, the individual behaviour of the employees and how the exchange of information is exercised in the organisation. An overview of the existing research linked to the influence of status symbols in the workplace environment has been provided, together with new empirical support to complement existing theoretical and field studies. The developed empirical research was designed to answer the following fundamental question:

*Are status symbols a barrier to intrinsic equality within the organisation?*

To explore the theoretical argumentations that deal with this research question, a study of the known justice concepts was carried out. On the one hand, the existing theory has confirmed that employees' overall perceptions of justice and fairness drive their attitudes and behaviours (Lind, 2007); whilst, on the other hand, the presence of status symbols in the workplace influences an employee's perception of the surrounding environment and organisational culture. This will be

aggravated by the inegalitarian environment enhanced by class stratification and both physical and psychological differentiating elements (Morand, 2010, p. 85). Inequity is a relevant source of psychological tension within an organisation (Goodman & Friedman, 1971) and the main factor for empathy erosion in the workplace, highlighting the negative feelings perceived by organisational members. Negative cognitions such as frustration, inferiority enhanced by the comparison to others, exclusion, mental states of competition, and envy were associated (Carney & Gets, 2009; Gets, 2009; Kuźma et al., 2019; Smith et al., 1999). Carney and Gets (Carney & Gets, 2009, pp. 132–134) suggested while observing the organisational environment that an unjust environment enhanced by the existence of symbols of status is against individual intrinsic equality, which is an important human need. This practical evidence was empirically tested in this research paper.

The empirical test has confirmed that individuals who perceive elements of status symbols in the workplace also reported levels of agreement regarding negative emotional responses, which are enhanced by a differentiating distributive working environment. Despite this confirmation, the correlation was relatively low. This could have several reasons that will be briefly explained, starting with characteristics of the sample, such as its size ( $N = 161$ ) and composition (culture, professional background, hierarchical position within the organisation and demographics). A specific selection of the sample's composition was not taken into account, which could lead to different or more

accurate results. Here, the author points out further research opportunities. Considering the lack of focus on this topic by researchers, the formulation of the survey questions was very limited. In addition, restrictions to the scale used to answer the questions were identified by some survey participants. Another potential factor that could lead to the result was the bilingual survey (Portuguese and English). Despite the pre-test, this could be responsible for interpretation difficulties and question misinterpretation by the respondents.

Regardless of the above-mentioned limitations, it can be concluded that differentiation in the workplace using symbols of status will negatively affect the individual intrinsic equality. Since individual intrinsic equality is an important human need according to the field research (Carney & Gets, 2009), the presence of status symbols in the workplace will negatively impact individual intrinsic motivation.

This research had the purpose of increasing the awareness of social differentiating mechanisms that still exist in today's organisations. It is the author's opinion that the organisational leadership has to consider approaches that promote and engage in levelling status. Their symbolic value should not be underestimated. The importance of a sense of community was highlighted,

and evidence pointed towards a future trend in organisational restructuring regarding hierarchical levels and individual differentiation. Managers who intend to implement such equalitarian views must "walk the talk" and live by their words, avoiding any double standards in the organisation.

Despite considerable challenges, management should deliberate/consider the effects of such elements in their organisations – for example, the private office as a symbol of a higher hierarchical position and inherent to the responsibility of the individual that enjoys it. The factual benefit of this element to one individual has to be weighed against other factors in the community.

It is not the purpose of this research to generate a less positive attitude towards these elements, but to raise this awareness and challenge the contemporary ideals to take the group's/company's well-being into account, determining the ultimate effects that such elements have on leader-member exchange relationships. If a private office is required, the leader should compensate this physical separation through other means of additional social contact with the followers, improving the communication and relationship between them.

### About the author

Rui André graduated in 2010 with a master's degree in mechanical engineering majoring in fluid dynamics in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Porto, Portugal. After working for approximately two years as an assistant site manager for one of the largest current hydropower projects in Portugal, in 2013 he moved to Germany to embrace a

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