Groups and Group Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Groups and teams are a major feature of organisational life. The work organisation and its sub-units are made of, are groups of people. Most activities of the organisation require at least some degree of co-ordination through the operation of groups and teamwork. An understanding of the nature of groups is vital if the manager is to influence the behaviour of people in the work situation. Groups are an essential feature of the work pattern of any organisation. Members of a group co-operate in order for work to be carried out and managers themselves work within the groups. People in groups influence each other in many ways and may develop their own hierarchy and leaders. Group pressures can have a major influence over the behaviour of individual members and their work performance. The activities of the group are associated with the process of leadership. The style of leadership adopted by the manager has an important influence on the behaviour of members of the group.

Keywords: co-ordination, upheaval, interaction, co-operation, loyalty, cohesiveness, norms and values.

INTRODUCTION

The essential feature of a group is that its members regard themselves as belonging to the group. A group is defined as any number of people who:
- interact with one another;
- are psychologically aware of one another; and
- perceive themselves to be a group.

A work group is a collection of people who share most, if not all, of the following characteristics:
- a definable membership;
- groups consciousness;
- a sense of shared purposes;
- interdependence; and
- ability to act in a unitary manner.

FORMATION OF GROUPS

Tuckman (1965) devised a model of group formation which consists of the following five stages as shown in Table 1: Group Formation.

Stage 1 – Forming

This refers to initial formation of the group where tasks have to be understood, resources and information acquired, individuals have to get to know one another and there is considerable reliance on the leader.

Stage 2 – Storming

It represents the period when problems begin to be faced more openly than in the earlier stage. Individuals begin to question or challenge the task and have to confront emotional issues between and among themselves.

Stage 3 – Norming

This period of relative upheaval moves into a more considered stage where conflicts are settled, new standards are developed and owned by the members. Cooperation really takes off.

Stage 4 – Performing

This stage opens the way for the most productive moment when the group is working effectively both in terms of goals and its internal relationships. Teamwork develops and solutions are found.

Stage 5 – Adjourning

This stage underlines the fact that a group's life will eventually come to an end as people move on elsewhere in the organisation or as original purpose is attained and the job is completed.

The above analysis demonstrates that the group/team development can only take place over time. To begin with, the group is more like a collection of individuals with little or no idea about what they are there for and who depends heavily on the leader for guidance and support. At this stage, they have no sense of team - spirit, no knowledge of each other's strengths and weaknesses and no mutual norms of behaviour, apart from those laid down at the outset by the leader. Over time, the group will gradually develop a sense of itself, its purpose and prime tasks, the purpose and prime tasks, the capabilities of its members, the roles they might be able to play and will develop norms of behaviour capable of carrying it through the foreseeable future. The role in the development of a group from a state of immaturity to one of maturity is that the leader, has the task of shaping the individuals into a cohesive team that is able to perform with competence.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL GROUPS

Work groups are divided into two namely, formal and informal groups.

Formal groups

These are the units that are established by management as part of an organisational structure. They are defined in terms of their purpose and roles. They are official in the sense that they have appropriate authority and they are provided with financial and physical resources. The groups are to:

- further the aims and objectives of the organisation as laid down in mission statements, policies and routine procedures;
- think of organisations being mainly composed of such formal groups.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMAL GROUPS

These are employee centred groups whose aims and intentions may counter those of the official organisation. The characteristics of the informal group are that: -

- they draw their norms (rules) of behaviour from amongst themselves;
- their first loyalty tends to be towards their fellow group members rather than to the organisation as a whole.
- their goals are decided more by what they feel is right for them rather than by what is laid down for them by the management;
- their behaviour is derived more from interpersonal relationships than by any role allocated by the management.
- their behaviour may or may not be in line with what their organisation expects;
- they generally meet social and security needs before other needs;
- group leadership is exercised on a charismatic basis rather than by legitimate authority;
- they are less permanent than formal groups

KEY ISSUES IN GROUP BEHAVIOUR

In examining the behaviour of people in groups, whether formal or informal, there are a number of key issues that have to be considered and these are: -

1. Group size

The size of a group is one factor that can determine its likely behaviour. Large groups: -
- require a higher degree of formalisation than smaller;
- require clearer lines of communication;
- tend to pay less attention to the needs of individuals than smaller groups.
- concentrate more on task requirements than personal issues;
- are more susceptible to the development of such - groups than smaller groups which are likely;

2. Purpose of group

Work - groups are assigned definite purpose within the organisational structure. Work - groups are often asked to focus their efforts on specific problems, usually of a short-term nature. Some groups are especially set up for this very purpose, such as task-forces, working parties and project groups. Short-term tasks are usually allocated some explicit time limit.

3. Nature of task

The nature of the task is broadly decided in terms of the group's purpose and objectives. A fairly specific task and outcome will demand different quantities from the group compared with, say a generally-stated problem requiring further questions to be asked. Some types of the tasks can be: -
- Ongoing or routine;
- Implementing new process or procedures;
- Creating new ideas;
- Solving specific problems or issues;
- Important negotiations with customers or competitors.

GROUP LEADERSHIP

In a formal group, a leader is formally appointed by management to take charge of the role. It is the leader who has the responsibility of keeping the group together when difficulties arise. Thus, there will always be a requirement for an effective leader. An autocratic leader will always take the decisions for the group, but a democratic leader will discuss possible decisions with the group before making a choice and may even let another group member take charge temporarily. The main role of the format leader is to use the resources of the group members to the full, gain their commitment to the task and achieve the result set by management.

NATURE AND MOTIVATION OF GROUP MEMBERS

There is need for any group to have an appropriate mix of skills; knowledge and talents, for these represent its main resources. Groups with specific purpose or under pressure will need sufficient common values among members, otherwise they will fall apart and be unable to complete their objectives. A substantial degree of commitment to the group's tasks is needed if the tasks are to be achieved successfully. Part of the individual motivation has to be the thought that the others are relying on him/her and that the team's performance is just as crucial as individual performance. Team-spirit is an aspect of group cohesiveness.

GROUP COHESIVENESS

A cohesive group has strong bonds that bind the members in loyalty to and support for each other. A cohesive group develops clear standards of behaviour (norms)

which are accepted by the members. Sometimes this can be a positive thing, where true team-spirit and collaboration are the order of the day. It can also not negatively affect the group's standards to a point of oppressing individual members, especially those seeking changes in the group's behaviour (Janis, 1982). Cohesiveness develops over time. New groups usually lack this quality precisely because they are a new assembly of people who know very little about their task and each other. An important aspect of the group leader's task is to achieve a measure of cohesiveness. Other factors that influence the degree of cohesiveness are as follows: -

- Similarity of task in achieving group goals;
- Interdependent operations;
- Leadership capabilities of the appointed leader;
- Extent to which group goals are shared by group members;
- Extent to which members want to work together;
- Prospect of rewards for group achievements; and
- Prospect of threats from external sources etc.

Groups which are very cohesive are insulated - against external forces, and change is unlikely to be accepted if imposed from outside. In such groups, change must come from within. Thus, cohesive groups, both formal and informal, can represent a threat to management's corporate aims and authority. In such circumstances it is easy to understand why weak managements often prevent bonding in groups, adopting "a divide and rule tactic" in order to retain control. On the contrary, actively stimulate team-spirit in work-groups, but do so in the context of a carefully- tended organisational culture.

GROUP NORMS

Norms are the standards adopted by a group. Most of these standards will be contained in written policies and operating manuals. They will also be emphasized by the personal behaviour of managers and supervisors. The role of the managers is to insist on adherence to official norms. Part of the function of the organisational culture is to encourage adherence to organisation-wide norms e.g. attention to quality. In a new group where new standards have been introduced, there is a period when the norms come to be challenged by individuals and the group. Unofficial norms are those norms which arise from amongst the group members. However management cannot stop unofficial norms from developing but what they can do is to: -

- recognise them when they arise;
- encourage them if they are in line with organisational interests;
- aim to transform them if they appear to be working against the organisation's interests. Ultimately management has the power to disband and reform groups, if they appear to be getting too far out of line.

ROLES WITHIN GROUPS

Roles are parts that individual members of a group play. The parts are determined partly by the expectation of the management through job descriptions and partly by the expectations of the others in the group. In formal groups, parts are mostly allocated in conjunction with job functions. In informal groups, roles are likely to spring from: -

- the relevant knowledge or skills possessed by individuals.
- personal qualities that have a stronger influence on informal groups where for example, a natural leader may emerge.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The context in which group operates can be described from the perspective of:
- the physical environment;
- the social context.

Most of the issues described earlier refer to the group's internal environment - its organisation, personnel, role requirements etc. However, the group life that springs from that internal environment influences, is also influenced by what goes on in the external environment.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

If a team is working in close proximity, there will be ample opportunity to develop an understanding of each other's and experience collaboration. If problems arise, they can be dealt with quickly and everyone can be consulted.

Where a team is a scattered then it is more difficult to build up team spirit, assess each other's strengths and weaknesses and confront problems speedily. Hence pressure is on team managers to call for regular team-meetings and to maintain close contact by telephone, fax etc. Regular information bulletins are sometimes used by sales managers to help keep everyone in the team aware of what is happening elsewhere in the company. Occasionally, a managing director gathers all key staff at a suitable off-site location in order to spend a day or two reviewing strategy or dealing with difficult problems.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Social context is extremely important in the life of a group. The organisational environment is a reflection of people and their needs and intentions. Outsiders, such as customers can make an impact on the social environment by insisting on certain standards of employee behaviour or particular arrangements for structuring relationships between themselves and the employees they have to deal with.

DECISION - MARKING IN GROUPS

Although some day-to-day decisions are made by individual managers and employees, there are certain kinds of decisions which are generally handled by groups. These tend to be the kinds of decisions that require a number of minds to wrestle with them either: -
- because of their complexity; or

- because they need to be acceptable to a majority of those responsible for implementing them. Complex decisions clearly benefit from the old idea that "two heads are better than one".

CONCLUSION

Groups such as committees are brought into existence for the purpose of making decisions or making recommendations for subsequent decisions. A committee' usually comprises some forces in the first instance i.e. the first people who are chosen to sit on a particular committee where they are selected because of the interest groups they represent e.g. powerful departments. This ensures that people with power in the organisation will be part both to the discussions about key issues and to the subsequent decisions taken to meet them. Such powerful people will share the responsibility for decisions and for getting the commitment of their staff to fulfilling them.

Committees also look for expertise thus; the membership is expanded to ensure availability of expert knowledge and skills in the relevant areas of the business. For example, firms operating in high technology markets will usually include specialist electronics and engineering staff.

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Table 1: Group Formation

Stage 1	-	Forming
Stage 2	-	Storming
Stage 3	-	Norming
Stage 4	-	Performing
Stage 5	-	Adjourning