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Informal Group Dynamics at Work

Jeff Lane was at his wits end. As a newly appointed production manager, he had tried virtually everything to get his group to abide by the production standards. The equipment was operating properly, and the group had been trained and was experienced enough. Yet it was not performing well. What was wrong? What could he do to correct the situation?

Many managers and supervisors frequently face such a dilemma. What they fail to realize is that within every organization, there are often informal group pressures that influence and regulate individual behavior.

Informal groups formulate an implicit code of ethics and establish acceptable behaviors. In Jeff's department, the informal group may have established a standard that is below the organization's standards, thus subtly exercising control over its members regarding the amount of output.

The dynamism of informal groups

Informal groups always exist. Often, these groups serve a counter-organizational function. If management prescribes production norms that the group considers unfair, the group recourses and adopts less demanding norms, sabotaging management's imposed standards.

Informal groups have a powerful influence on the effectiveness of an organization and can even subvert its formal goals. However, the informal group's role is not limited to resistance. The impact of the informal group upon the larger formal group depends on the norms that they set. If the informal group has higher standards than the organization and positive norms, they can actually enhance organizational effectiveness.

Norms represent the group's basis for working. A norm is an implied agreement among the group's members regarding behavior of members in the group. From the perspective of the formal group, norms generally fall into three categories - positive, negative, and neutral. In other words, norms support, obstruct, or have no effect on the aims of the larger organization.

For example, if the informal group in Jeff's organization sets a norm supporting high output, that norm would have been more potent than any attempt by Jeff to coerce compliance with the standard. The reason is simple, yet profound. The norm is of the group members' own making, and is not one imposed upon them. There is a big motivational difference between being told what to do and being anxious to do it.

If Jeff had been aware of group dynamics, he might have realized that informal groups can be either his best friend or his worst enemy. He should have been sensitive to the informal groups within his area, and he should have made use of the informal group leadership to gain some cooperation.

Harnessing the power of informal groups is no easy task. The requirements include:



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- An understanding of group dynamics
- An ability to bring about changes in informal group norms so that they positively reinforce the formal organization's goals

As a starting point, managers and supervisors should at least be aware of the reasoning behind the formation of the informal group, as well as its properties and characteristics.