# Team Building
## Managing the Norms of Informal Groups in the Workplace

### Introduction

Jeff Lane was at his wits end. As a newly appointed production manager, he had tried virtually everything to get his work group to come up to production standard. The equipment was operating properly, and the group had the training and experience to meet expectations, yet it was not performing well. What was wrong? And what could he do to correct the situation?

Managers and supervisors frequently face such a dilemma-standards that should be met but aren't for what seems like no apparent reason. What Jeff Lane and other managers/ supervisors sometimes 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 or an unspoken set of standards establishing acceptable behavior In Jeff's department, the informal group may have established a norm below that set by the organization, subtly exercising control over its members regarding the amount of output.

### aims of this article

Explore the dynamics of informal workgroups in the workplace

Define the key dynamics in informal workgroups

Illustrate these dynamics with a number of examples of how they may operate

Suggest a 3–step approach to improve existing group norms

### The dynamics of informal groups

Informal groups almost always arise if opportunities exist. Often, these groups serve a counter organizational function, attempting to counteract the coercive tendencies in an organization. If management prescribes production norms that the group considers unfair, for instance, the group's recourse is to adopt less demanding norms and to use its ingenuity to discover ways in which it can sabotage management's imposed standards.

Informal groups have a powerful influence on the effectiveness of an organization, and can even subvert its formal goals. But 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 the informal group sets. So the informal group can make the formal organization more effective, too.

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

For example, it the informal group in Jeff's shop set 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 cultivated their goodwill and cooperation and made use of the informal group leadership.

That is, he should have wooed the leadership of the informal group and enlisted the support of its membership to achieve the formal organization's aims. The final effect of his actions might have been positive or negative, depending upon the agreement or lack of it between the informal group and himself.

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

- an understanding of group dynamics and,
- an ability to bring about changes in informal group norms that positively reinforce the formal organization's goals.

As a starting point, managers and supervisors should at least be aware of the reasons behind informal group formation and the properties and characteristics of these groups.

### Formation of informal groups

Individuals are employed by an organization to perform specific functions. Although the whole person joins an organization, attention is usually focused on the partial person, the part of the individual doing the job. Because people have needs that extend beyond the work itself, informal groups develop to fill certain emotional, social, and psychological needs.

The degree to which a group satisfies its members needs determines the limits within which individual members of the group will allow their behavior to be controlled by the group.

### Sense of belonging

Several major functions are served by informal groups. For example, the group serves as a means of satisfying the affiliation needs of its members for friendship and support.

People need to belong, to be liked, to feel a part of something. Because the informal group can withhold this attractive reward, it has a tool of its own to coerce compliance with its norms.

### Identity and self esteem

Groups also provide a means of developing, enhancing, and confirming a person's sense of identity and self-esteem. Although many organizations attempt to recognize these higher needs, the nature of some jobs-their technology and environment-precludes this from happening. The long assembly line or endless rows of desks reinforce a feeling of depersonalization.

### Stress reduction

Another function of groups is to serve as an agent for establishing and testing social reality. For instance, several individuals may share the feeling that their supervisor is a slave driver or that their working conditions are inadequate. By developing a consensus about these feelings, group members are able to reduce the anxiety associated with their jobs.

### All for one, one for all

Finally, the informal group serves as a defense mechanism against forces that group members could not resist on their own. Joining forces in a small group makes the members feel stronger, less anxious, and less insecure in the face of a perceived threat.

As long as needs exist that are not served by the formal organization, informal groups will form to fill the gap. Since the group fills many important needs for its members, it influences member behavior.

### Leadership of informal groups

Informal groups possess certain characteristics that, if understood, can be used to advantage. While many of these characteristics are similar to those of formal organizations, others are unique. One attribute of informal groups is rotational leadership.

The informal leader emerges as the individual possessing qualities that the other members perceive as critical to the satisfaction of their specific needs at the moment; as the needs change so does the leader. Only rarely does a single individual possess all of the leadership characteristics needed to fill the various needs of the group.

Unlike the formally appointed leader who has a defined position from which to influence others, the informal leader does not possess formal power. If the informal leader fails to meet the group's expectations, he or she is deposed and replaced by another. The informal group's judgment of its leaders tends to be quicker and more cold-blooded than that of most formal groups.

### Supervisory strategies

The supervisor can use several strategies to affect the leadership and harness the power of informal groups. One quick and sure method of changing a group is to cause the leader to change one or more of his or her characteristics. Another is to replace the leader with another person.

One common ploy is to systematically rotate out of the group its leaders and its key members. Considering the rotational nature of leadership, a leader may emerge who has aims similar to the formal goals of the organization. There are problems with this approach, however. Besides the practical difficulties of this, such strategy is blunted by the fact that group norms often persist long after the leader has left the group.

A less Machiavellian approach is for the supervisor to be alert to leaders sympathetic to the supervisor's objectives and to use

them toward the betterment of the formal group's effectiveness. Still another method is to attempt to 'co-opt' informal leaders by absorbing them into the leadership or the decision-making structure of the formal group. Co-opting the informal leader often serves as a means of averting threats to the stability of the formal organization.

Remember, though, a leader may lose favor with the group because of this association with management, and group members will most likely select another leader.

## Communications of informal groups (the grapevine)

Another characteristic of the informal group is its communications network. The informal group has communications processes that are smoother and less cumbersome than those of the formal organization.

Thus its procedures are easily changed to meet the communication needs of the group. In the informal group, a person who possesses information vital to the group's functioning or well-being is frequently afforded leadership status by its members. Also, the centrally located person in the group is in the best position to facilitate the smooth flow of information among group members.

Knowing about informal group communication the supervisor can provide a strategically placed individual with information needed by the group. This not only enhances the stature of this individual perhaps elevating him or her to a leadership position but also provides an efficient means of distributing information. Providing relevant information to the group will also help foster harmony between the supervisor and the informal group.

By winning the cooperation of informal group leaders the supervisor will most likely experience fewer grievances and better relationships.

## Informal group cohesiveness

A third characteristic of informal groups is group cohesiveness-the force that holds a group together. Group cohesiveness varies widely based on numerous factors-including the size of the group dependence of members upon the group achievement of goals status of the group and management demands and pressures. For example group cohesiveness increases strongly whenever the membership perceives a threat from the outside. This threat produces the high anxiety that strong group cohesiveness can help reduce.

If the supervisor presses the group to conform to a new organizational norm that Is viewed as a threat to the security needs of group members The group will become more unified in order to withstand the perceived threat. Thus management can limit its own effectiveness by helping to increase the group's cohesiveness. With the passing of the threat the group tends to lose its cohesiveness.

Perhaps paradoxically the most dangerous time for group cohesion is when things are going well. Supervisors can use the factors that affect group cohesiveness to increase their own effectiveness.

## Involvement in decision making process

For instance a supervisor can involve the informal group members in the decision-making process. Input from group members will not only reduce their feeling of alienation but also improve communication between the supervisor and subordinates thereby reducing potential conflict.

Where group participation in decision making is not practical the supervisor should carefully explain the reasons to play down what might be seen as a threat to the group. In some cases the supervisor may want

to increase the groups cohesiveness deliberately devising situations that put one group into competition with another. If this gambit is carefully controlled the solidarity that results may bring a higher level of performance.

The danger of this strategy is that the supervisor may be unable to control the reaction of the group. The ploy could backfire bringing competition and dissension within the group.

## Informal group norms–unspoken rules

The final characteristic of informal groups is their establishment of norms. As we discussed earlier, norms keep a group functioning as a system instead of a collection of individuals.

Norms are of great importance to the informal group in controlling behavior and measuring the performance of members. Because norm violations threaten a group's existence, departures from the norm usually carry severe sanctions. The members must either conform or sever their group affiliation.

The latter action is unlikely, especially if the individual values group membership to satisfy certain needs. Two points are important to note about the norms of informal groups.

- First, where both formal and informal norms exist, the informal norms transcend the formal. At moments when norms conflict with organizational objectives, organizational effectiveness suffers.
- Second, members of an informal group may be unaware that the norms of the group influence their behavior. Norms are particularly potent because without knowing it members would not even think of acting otherwise-norms are that ingrained into their behavior pattern.

## Changing informal group norms

A supervisor should attempt to encourage norms that positively affect the formal organization's goals, and to alter those that are negative. If this is accomplished, the informal group/ team will direct its energies toward desired goals.

How can a supervisor bring about a positive change in a group / team's norms?

Once a group / team has developed its norms, they are strictly enforced until changed. But norms change frequently because the group / team must be responsive to changes in its environment for self-protection. When a perceived change occurs in the environment that affects the group / team, it tightens, eases, or changes it norms.

There are three stages to fostering group / team norms that are congenial to the organization.
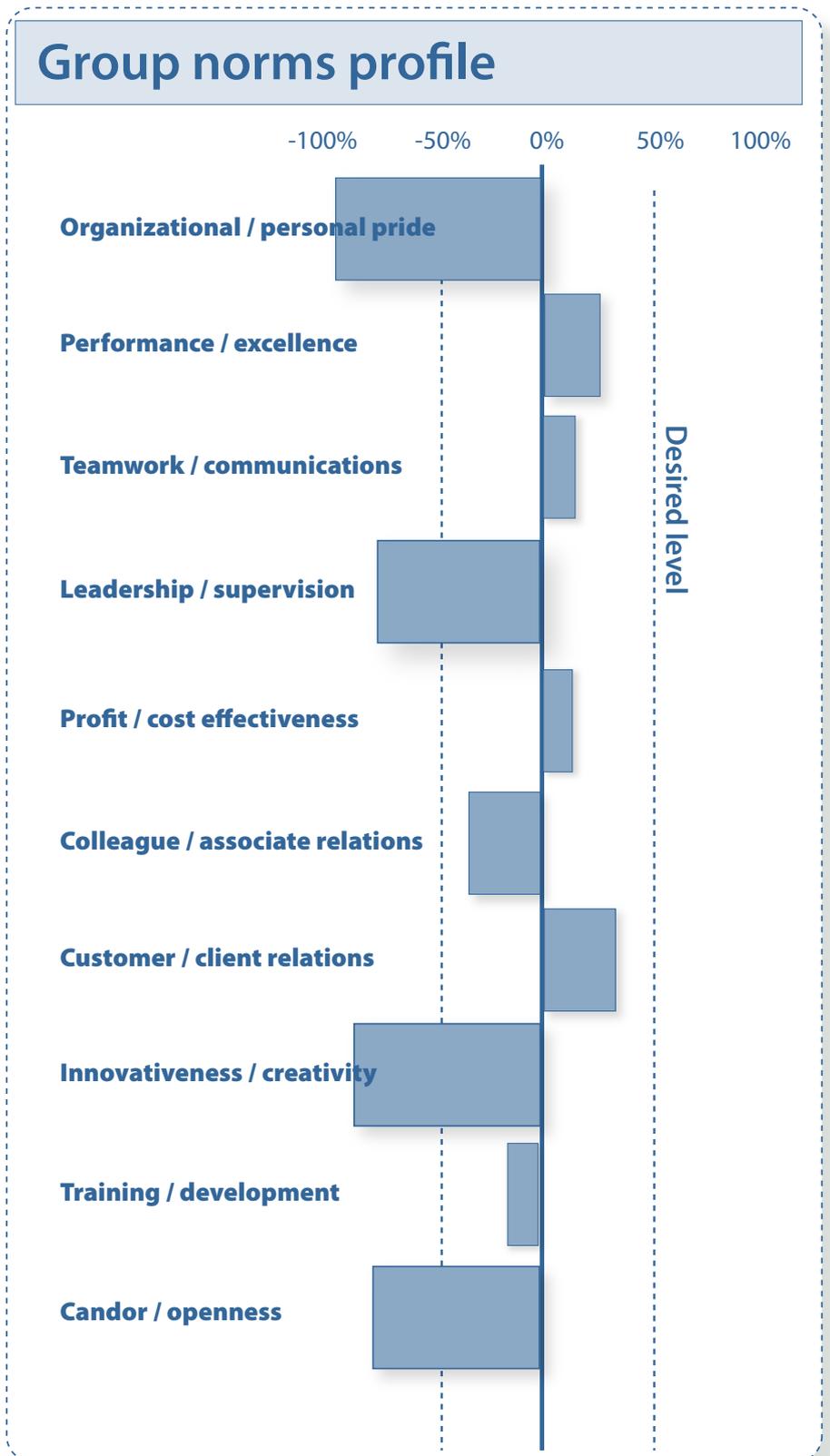
### First Stage

The first stage involves determining what the group/ team norms are, and then getting group/ team members to recognize their existence and influence.

This can often be accomplished by observing the behavior patterns of the group / team, interviewing group / team members, or asking the group/ team to identify its own norms.

As we noted, people frequently respect and follow norms unconsciously. Helping define norms is useful because it assists the group / team in clarifying its thinking and frees members from behavior patterns that they may not really wish to follow in the first place.

When group / team members actually become aware of negative norms, they commonly reject them and seek alternative modes of behavior. And the supervisor can't begin to change negative norms to positive ones until group / team members first become aware of their existence.



## Group norms profile

Desired level

Organizational / personal pride

Performance / excellence

Teamwork / communications

Leadership / supervision

Profit / cost effectiveness

Colleague / associate relations

Customer / client relations

Innovativeness / creativity

Training / development

Candor / openness

### Second Stage

Once the group/ team's norms are identified, the next stage is to measure the norms and establish a group norm profile. Various norm categories should be established that relate to organizational and group/ team effectiveness. The 'Group norms profile' graphic indicates some appropriately chosen norms.

You can construct your own survey instrument, to measure your groups norms. Or, you can purchase the Accel Team *Organizational Norms Survey Instrument.* Whatever route you take each group/ team member should then be asked to rate each of the norm's intensity from low to high. An appropriate scale should be used, so that the actual (averaged) responses can be evaluated against a desired level, for each norm under review.

As shown in the 'Group norms profile' graphic, the responses can be averaged and plotted in order to obtain a norm profile.

The difference between where the group / team is and where it should be, represents a normative "gap." These gaps provide a starting point for determining where changes should occur.

### Third Stage

The final stage is to bring about normative change. A systematic change process consists of six steps:
1. Demonstrate the importance of norms in achieving organizational and group/ team effectiveness.
2. Create positive norm goals through cooperative effort.
3. Establish normative change priorities.
4. Determine a plan of action to bring about change.
5. Implement and monitor the change strategy.
6. Review the effectiveness of the strategy periodically and modify where necessary.

This process emphasizes the creation of positive norms through cooperative effort that benefits both the supervisor and the group/ team. Positive group/ team norms increase the effectiveness of the supervisor while providing an environment in which group/ team members can satisfy their own needs.

The process also improves team communications and trust, reducing the anxiety sometimes created by perceived threats from management.

If the informal group's norms are negative, they can negate the interests of an organization many times the group / team's size. The process of change is a tool by which a supervisor can deal with the informal group/ team stresses that exist within the organization and that tend to de-motivate employees.

By fostering positive group norms, a supervisor can harness the power of informal groups and release the energies of such groups to work together much better as a team to achieve desired goals.

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