

A Conceptual Scheme for Describing Work Group Behaviour

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What follows is an effort to spell out one terminology and system of concepts for describing the behaviour of small groups of people at work. This particular “conceptual scheme” is based primarily on the work of George C. Homans.

Required and Emergent Group Behaviour

It is a matter of common experience that when people work together, they soon develop ways of thinking and behaving that are different from, or in addition to, the behaviour which is required to perform the job. For example, they may do more or less work than they are supposed to, do it in a different manner than is prescribed, or engage in purely social activity. Sometimes, this “emergent” behaviour in fact assists in the more effective performance of the assigned task; at other times, it hinders it. In any case, for many people, it seems to be unpredictable and not well understood. We need a scheme for describing and understanding the ways people in work groups – no matter what their background or what kind of work they are doing together – actually behave. A useful theory of work group behaviour will emphasize the difference and the interrelatedness, of:

1. That behaviour with which the group starts, so to speak, i.e., what is given and what is required by external forces and conditions in order that the assigned task of the group may be performed; and,
2. That behaviour which develops internally, or emerges over the above that which is given or required.

This is not to say that it is necessary or even possible to determine whether any observed behaviour or attitude on the part of group members is given or required, on the one hand, or emergent, on the other. Often such distinctions are very difficult to make, and they are not useful. Nevertheless, the observer, or leader of any group will find it easier to understand and predict how the members of a group are likely to behave) for example, how they will probably react to changing circumstances) if he keeps in mind that much of **the behaviour that will eventually emerge is separate from but related to the ways of thinking and behaving which people bring with them to the group plus the behaviour required to do the job.** Some kind of behaviour other than the bare minimum required by the job will inevitably emerge, and this behaviour will not be random but will have a pattern and an understandable relationship with that which was given and required. Furthermore, this relationship will eventually work in both directions, i.e., what emerges will in turn influence (feedback on) what is required and given. (For example, if restriction of output at a certain level emerges, this fact, once recognized, will affect future management decision which will, in turn, have new influences on the formal job requirements, and thereby either modify or reinforce the original emergent behaviour). With great understanding of this relationship between the given and emergent aspects of a group’s behaviour, management is less likely to be surprised at what emerges.

The Elements of Group Behaviour

In order to achieve such understanding, it is helpful to look separately at the different elements of group (or any human) behaviour, and to study how these elements are related to each other. The conceptual scheme described here uses three major

elements: activities, interaction and sentiments. In describing behaviour which is required by the nature of the task or by the necessity for the organization to survive in an environment, or which the members bring with them to the group as an outcome of their life outside it, we speak of required or given or external activity, interaction or sentiment. Thus, we conceive of **an external system for every group, consisting of the following elements and the relationships between them: required activity, required interaction, required sentiment and given sentiment**. In addition, we use the terms values to refer to one particular category of given sentiments. In describing behaviour which is not required to given but which is elaborated by the group beyond the demands of the external system, we use the term emergent. **The emergent elements and their relationship comprise the group's internal system**. In addition, the scheme pays particular attention to one category of emergent sentiments, namely, the norms that develop in the group. In short, the basic vocabulary of this scheme consists of the following terms: external, internal activity, interaction, sentiment, value and norms.

These terms can be defined as follows:

Activity

What a person does (e.g. talks, runs, calculates, manipulates machinery, falls asleep, makes a quota, engages in horseplay and so forth) [observable]

Interaction

A communication or contact between two persons such that the activity of one responds to the activity of the other. Every conversation is an interaction (or series of interactions), but there are also many non-verbal communications or contacts which are equally valid as interaction as here defined (and in talking, no real interaction is taking place). In observing interactions, it is usually important to note by whom they are initiated and whether two or more people are simultaneously involved. (Some interactions in work groups are not initiated by anyone, but rather there is a joint response to the demands of the evolving situation or work process. [observable]

Sentiment

A sentiment is an idea, belief, or feeling, for instance, about the work and others involved in it. This is obviously a very large category, capable of much more detailed analysis. Note that, unlike activities and interactions, sentiments are not directly observable. Sentiments such as "This room is too hot for me to feel like working" or "My boss is a great guy" can be inferred from observed activity and interaction, or from expressed responses to specific questions, but not observed at first hand. [not observable]

Required Sentiment

A belief or feeling that an employee must have in order to be willing to perform the task as assigned.

Given Sentiment and Value

A sentiment is a belief or feeling that a member brings with him into a group because of his life outside it and his personal background. When given sentiments pertain to ideals and aspirations that are desirable but impossible to realize absolutely, they are called values. Thus "a value is an unlimited idea of what is desirable", such as a belief in fair treatment, good pay, or "freedom" from "being pushed around". **The degree to which an individual lives up to or represents the values that are most important to others is important in determining his "external status" in their eyes**. Thus, for any group,

certain values from the outside culture define the relative status of different members; men may be accorded higher status than women, one ethnic background more respect than another, and so forth.

Norms

A certain kind of emergent sentiment, namely, an idea or belief about what the sentiments, activities, or interactions in a particular group would be. In contrast to a value, "norm is a limited idea of what is desirable; it can be fully realized. Norms develop in any group, with greater or less degree of consensus; and they serve to define how, as a member in good standing, one should behave in relation to outsiders, other members, the job, and the emergent non-work activities. The extent to which a group member upholds such norms helps define his/her "internal rank" or social standing in the group. Thus, internal rank is related to norms in much the same way as external status is related to values. For example, if a particular sentiment about productivity is a norm, the degree to which each member shares this sentiment and acts to uphold it will influence his/her standing in the group and vice versa, his/her standing in the group, as established in other ways, is likely to influence the extent to which he/she shares this norm). Strictly speaking, the term norm applies not to a general ideal but rather to a standard of behaviour that can be violated only at the risk of punishment from other members of the group.

So far, we have emphasized that group behaviour **emerges** which is different from that which is given or required by the work, and we have defined the meaning of the terms by which the basic elements of this behaviour can be described. In doing so, we have started to point to some of the more important relationships which exist between these elements, as well as between the given and emergent aspects of group behaviour. To understand how this scheme can be useful, we should describe and illustrate some important hypotheses concerning the relationships between emergent activity, interaction, sentiment, and norms. However, now let us confine attention to the "external system" considering especially where required and given behaviour originates and how likely it is to be significantly different in various kinds of groups.

Background Factors Determining Required and Given Behaviour

It is obvious that any job requires certain activities for its successful performance, and that the nature of these activities varies according to the particular technology and job design. There are also significant variations in the extent to which the precise nature of the activities required to perform the job are specified, that is, in the amount of individual variation in activity that is permissible in accomplishing the work. Required activities depend not only on the job design and the technology, but also on management policies and practices and on the assumptions by management concerning how much individuals should be allowed to contribute to determining precisely how the work should be performed. Required activities also are influenced by the individual characteristics and backgrounds of the people performing the job (variations in aptitude, training, and so forth). Different outside social and economic influences will also affect required activities, primarily through their influence on management policy and the particular system of rewards and punishment used in an organization.

The same set of influences – technology, job design, management policy and practice, leadership behaviour, personal backgrounds, and economic and social environment – also define the particular required interactions that will obtain between the members of any work group. The nature of the job, management's behaviour, and so forth will

require that certain people interact with certain other people; whereas, between other members, no interaction may be required.

It is not so obvious, but equally true, that the same set of background factors that determine required activities and interactions also establish certain “required sentiments”. There are always certain beliefs about himself/herself, work, other people, and so forth that an individual must have in order to perform the job in the manner in which he is supposed to. The technology, the management, the environment, and the individual’s own background all help to determine which sentiments must be present in a group, at least to some extent, before the members will be willing to perform the task assigned them. However, the different determinants of required sentiments can be in conflict with each other, for example, some technologies require a high degree of willingness to exercise individual initiative than is appropriate according to management’s assumptions about what sentiments workers are supposed to have.

In addition, there may be some conflict between the sentiments required by the technology, for example, and the “given sentiments”. These, it will be remembered, are beliefs and values which individuals bring with them to work, and are determined by their previous personal backgrounds and experiences in the outside environment. The values shared by members of a work group as a result of their backgrounds and previous work experiences, will obviously be an important influence on their approach to the job, on their ideas about status, and on their developing relationships with each other.

All the behaviour considered so far, namely, the required activities, interactions, and sentiments, and the given sentiments, then are theoretically determined by a set of “background factors” over which members of the group have little or no control, namely, their own personal characteristics and backgrounds, external economic and social influences, management policies and practices, the supervisor’s behaviour, the technology, and job design. The first two columns attempt to represent the more important influences existing between these background factors and the required and given elements of behaviour. Not that one of the most important influences on management policy is the “feedback” received from the eventually emerging productivity, satisfaction and individual development of the members of the group. Among the results of this feedback, for example, may be a management decision to modify the technology.

Conflicts are possible between some of these required and given elements; but if this were all there was to group life, predicting group behaviour would be relatively easy and uninteresting.

Emergent Behaviour

Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one’s point of view, in considering what is “given” and “required”, we have looked only at a bare minimum of group behaviour. The actual behaviour of almost any group is far more complicated and interesting. The actual behaviour of almost any group is far more complicated and interesting. However, enough small groups have been systematically studied under a wide enough variety of circumstances to develop a number of useful general propositions concerning the emergence of the various elements of behaviour (sentiments, interactions, activities, and norms) and the relationships between these emergent elements.

It is important to emphasize that these propositions are “useful” but not universally reliable. They all assume that a host of other variables which in any concrete situation

influence behaviour are temporarily inactive, In spite of the unreality of this assumption, however, the propositions do provide a helpful beginning for understanding emergent small group behaviour; and often, they can be used in making reasonably accurate predictions concerning the particular behaviour which is likely to emerge in a given group under certain circumstances. Some of these propositions will appear obvious, and others will appear far-fetched. A more valid criterion for judging them is their usefulness in understanding and predicting concrete behaviour – and in this respect, several different kinds of research have shown them to stand up remarkably well, considering the present early stage of development in behavioural science.) In the following discussion, none of these propositions will be presented in simplified form, although to be understandable, brief, and at the same time fair to the conceptual scheme will be difficult, if not impossible. The theory, from which the following propositions are derived, like any good theory, consists essentially of a system of interrelated hypotheses, no part of which makes much sense with an understanding of the whole).

Given Sentiments and Emergent Behaviour

A careful analysis of the values which members bring to a group will obviously aid prediction about the activities, interaction, sentiments, and norms that are likely to emerge. Values are, by definition, closely related to norms and the relationship between values and the other elements is also fairly easy to predict. For example, more frequent than usual interaction, and more favourable sentiments, can be expected to emerge between members whose given sentiments are similar. High “status” derived from the external social system is likely to be related initially, at least, to emergent interpersonal sentiment and “rank” in the internal social structure.

Interaction and Sentiment

The above two paragraphs were concerned with relations between the external and internal systems. Now, we confine our attention to the internal system by presenting hypotheses about how the different emergent behaviour is that interaction and interpersonal sentiment are closely related. More specifically, they hypothesis states that, in the absence of contrary influences, favourable sentiments emerge between members who interact frequently and, vice versa, frequent interaction emerges between members who like each other. Under certain circumstances, increasing interaction may be associated with less favourable sentiments; but the notion that other things being equal, members who like one another will interact more frequently than those who do not, is in a sense the key hypothesis concerning emergent elements of the “internal system”.

Activities, Sentiments, and Norms

Unfavourable sentiments will be directed against members who do not share or who violate the norms generally accepted in the group. Furthermore, these unfavourable sentiments frequently lead to the emergence of further activities that have the function of punishing the violators of the norms and which may well lead to further defensive or aggressive activities by the violators. Thus, circular situation is likely to arise in which both the violators and the upholders of the group’s norms each have their sentiments about the others reinforced by the others’ activities.

Activities, Interactions and Norms

The quantity and quality of interaction between two members, A and B, is related not only to the sentiment between them, but also to the extent to which A perceives B’s activities as violating the norms of the group. In other words, when a member violates a

norm, interaction toward him/her will initially increase as efforts are made to “bring him/her into line”. However, if these efforts fail and he/she persists in violating the norm he/she will be the recipient of increasingly unfavourable sentiments and consequently decreasing interaction. Thus, the punishment for persistent norm violation is isolation from regular membership and only those willing to pay this price will persist in such activity. Since, in work groups, important norms almost inevitably emerge concerning output, it follows that “slackers” or “rate busters” can expect hostility followed by low interaction with other members (although they may form a subgroup with others who share their values).

Social Structure and membership Categories

It can be seen that starting with a relatively simple set of required behaviours, a complex pattern of activity, interaction and sentiment between the members is likely to emerge which will have as a vital function preserving the norms and protecting the group against outside pressures perceived as threats to the behaviour pattern that the group finds relatively satisfying. Emergent interactions, when observed, can be used to map out the probable pattern of interpersonal sentiments, or vice versa. Recipients of favourable sentiment are likely to be frequent interactors, and their activities will be likely to conform closely to the groups’ norms. Thus, there usually emerges in a work group a core of “regular members” which will include the informal leader or leaders of the group. In general, social standing in the group will depend on faithfulness to its norms. The informal leaders, in particular, will tend to be frequent initiators of interaction involving more than two people. They will be especially careful to live up the group’s norms, since they have the most to lose by violating them.

At the other extreme from the “regulars”, there will usually be several “isolates” whose interaction with other members is infrequent; they will have adapted to this situation and will express little interest in more regular membership or in observing the group’s norms. In between these two extremes will be members at various degrees of “regularity”. Among them may be some “deviants” whose interaction rate among themselves and even with the regulars is relatively frequent, but who are denied regular membership because of unwillingness or inability to accept the dominant norms and values.

In spite of the wide variations in the nature of the social structure that emerges from group to group, in the above rough classification of membership categories (regular, deviant, isolate) is often useful in interpreting behaviour of individual members. And from what has been said of the interrelationships between emergent interaction, activity, and sentiment, and the function of this behaviour as a defence against outside influences, it can be seen why these categories, once established, tend to reinforce themselves.

Outcomes/Consequences

In fact, the reinforcing of these interrelated elements of behaviour is their most significant characteristic. The social structure helps to preserve the norms that develop concerning activity and interaction. The resulting influence on the group’s productivity is likely to be strong and persistent, because in almost any group, norms emerge which specify quite precisely the quantity and quality of work expected of a member in good standing and the pressures to conform to these norms are not easy to resist. An increase in the perceived external threat to the group’s emergent behaviour is likely to increase the extent to which the norms and social structure control the members’ activity.

The relationships and non-work activities that emerge in a group will strongly influence the satisfaction that group members derive from their work experience. Where there is relatively frequent interaction and members like one another, where the social structure is relatively stable and well understood, and satisfaction is usually relatively high. This can be true whether productivity is high or low; thus, the relationship between productivity and satisfaction is more complex than is sometimes assumed.

Another “consequence” of work group behaviour, in addition to productivity and satisfaction, may be called individual development. Groups vary greatly in the extent to which they encourage or limit their members’ needs to learn, grow and develop as individual human beings. In any work group, there emerges a pattern of interaction, sentiment, and activity, a set of norms which define the extent to which members are able to fulfill their own potentialities, to achieve the personal goals and rewards important to them. Without a certain level of satisfaction, individual development is severely limited; but in many industrial work groups, satisfaction (from friendly relations with other members, for example) can be high while opportunities for the individual to learn and grow are severely limited. In the same way, individual development may be facilitated by high productivity, but only under certain conditions, as, for example, where a strong sense of individual contribution to the task is not in conflict with required sentiments or group norms.

Unfortunately, the conditions surrounding many industrial work groups are such that opportunities for individual development are often thwarted, and satisfaction derives almost entirely from activity not related to accomplishment of the form a task. Much of the emergent behaviour may become largely defensive against perceived threats from the outside. While satisfying members’ needs for social stability, such groups do little to satisfy needs for self-esteem and personal development. A more adequate understanding of why this is so, a more perceptive interpretation of the observable consequences of work group behaviour, will make it possible to structure more intelligently those background factors which management can directly influence.