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Subject Area - Management

Formal & Informal Groups Within An Organisation

How do informal groups differ from the formal teams & departments that exist in an organisation. As a manager, how would you try to understand the ways informal groups impact on the effectiveness of operational activity, and how would you influence them. To be based Award in a hospital

Informal Groups Within an Organisation

Abstract

Organisations contain formal groups which have been put into place by the organisational management to perform specific tasks in order to further the aims of the organisation. In addition to the formal groups, there are informal groups which can assume an existence in organisations as a result of the mutually shared interests of the individuals who are a part of the organisation. Informal groups exist purely because of mutual interests and have no formal mandate from the organisation. The membership of the informal groups seeks to satisfy some need by belonging to these groups. These needs may include needs for security, knowledge acquisition, informal attempts to shape organisational policy, family, social interaction etc.

Leadership position in such groups is freely accorded by the group membership based on qualities that are considered to be critical for the satisfaction of the needs of the moment, with changing needs resulting in changes of leadership. Informal groups in formal organisations can be powerful and important because they have the capability of supporting or opposing organisational aims. Organisational managers should attempt to acquaint themselves with the informal groups in their areas of jurisdiction so that informal discussions with these groups may be possible and attempts may be made to change their norms if they prove to be contrary to the organisational aims. Informal groups can be found in any organisational setting including clubs, schools, health care units, industries etc.

The motives behind their formation are a part of human nature and it should not be necessary to excessively interfere in the activities of informal groups unless they are proving to be destructive. In this essay, an attempt has been made to take a look at informal groups in organisations with a special emphasis on the informal groups to be found in a hospital ward.

1.1 Introduction

Organisations exist in order to perform useful functions or tasks which will generate revenues or provide a service. In order to achieve organisational missions, teams may be established within the organisation which are organised around a set of objectives. A team or a group is, therefore, considered to be a number of people who have been brought together as a result of a desire to perform some function or accomplish a set of objectives. Groups and teams are formally created in order to provide a remedy for the dysfunction of bureaucratic structures that may be present in an organisation.

Segmentation in organisations results in large problems being cut into sub - problems which are then cut into even

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smaller problems. These problems are then allocated to sub - units or components of sub-units which offer inputs to the problems or tasks and the solution to the whole consists of these inputs. Specially created groups within organisations may horizontally cut across existing boundaries and functions existing within organisations in an attempt to take advantage of lateral linkages. A management team or group with lateral linkages can therefore be created by the corporate management in order to better manage the organisation. Such groups which have been created as a result of the design choices and the development processes in an organisation are different from the informal groups which almost always come into existence in organisations if opportunities exist.

The informal groups which can come into being within organisations can come about as a result of common interests, desire to learn and share knowledge and achieve specific objectives. These groups can also act to counter organisational function and the imposed standards of management. Standards of the informal groups are the standards of the group members which have not been imposed on them by anyone and certainly not by the organisational management. The leaders of the informal groups in organisations will have power within the groups which can oppose the formal directives of the organisation or the organisational managers. Hence, it is important to realise that informal groups do exist within organisations and that they have an implicit code of ethics or an unspoken set of standards. In order to positively harness the power of the informal groups, it is important to understand group dynamics and to bring about changes in the informal group norms so as to support the formal organisation. [Arndt 1997]; [Onepine.Info 2005]

The terms groups and teams are often used interchangeably and are important concepts in management literature. Groups can be found almost anywhere including schools, work organisations, families, and hospitals as well as in sports clubs. As opposed to a group, a team is expected to have some positive attributes to it. A team will have cohesion, cooperation and teamwork and groups are expected to develop into teams. A team is, therefore, a special type of group which has become sufficiently organised in order to fulfil a mission or a purpose. A group can consist of more than one individuals capable of interacting with each other who are aware of their membership within a group as well as their positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals.

Although members of the group are most likely to have face-to-face interactions most of the time, they can also have interactions over the internet or other media once the group has been formed and members are known to each other. Informal groups will have communication processes which are smoother and less cumbersome than those of the formal organisation. Leadership status is mostly afforded to members who have access to information vital to the functioning of the group or the ability to distribute this information. Whereas formal groups come into existence as a result of organisation design, task allocation and decision making which result in communications and team learning, informal groups are formed as a result of mutually shared interests and are led by members with a strong commitment to the cause. Informal groups can provide a sense of belonging with friendship, support and affiliation along with a sense of identity as well as self esteem for its members.

Informal groups can also serve as defence mechanisms for forces that can be too great for a single individual to resist and may also serve as a platform to develop a consensus amongst members about issues which can also be related to the organisation and which may have been regarded as being controversial. The members in an informal group can feel more secure, less anxious and more capable of facing threats such as the cruel behaviour of a supervisor. The leadership of the informal group mostly belongs to the member who is most capable of satisfying the needs of the group and this leadership changes with changing requirements and the ability to cater for the requirements of other members.

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Because the informal leader does not possess formal powers, therefore, the informal leader can be deposed if this leader cannot adequately satisfy the requirements of the members. Because the cohesiveness of the informal groups can be enhanced in the face of external threats, attempts to force a group to conform to organisational norms can backfire and it may be better to try and neutralise the group leader or to conduct reasonable dialogue. Informal groups can have norms, values and unspoken rules which may be necessary to perpetuate the existence of the group and in some groups violations of these rules or norms can carry severe penalties.

Although informal groups become important and noticeable because they start to challenge the formal organisation, it must however, be realised that not all informal groups in organisations are harmful and some may in fact be serving a useful purpose such as knowledge sharing, helping members cope, generating ideas or pursuing hobbies. Apart from the work floor, informal groups can also exist as 'communities of practice' amongst professionals who are informally sharing knowledge, pursuing design excellence or in other ways controlling and generating knowledge or skills in an organisation. [Accel-Team.com 2005]; [Rupert 2004]; [Fiona 2004]

Informal groups in organisations arise as a result of the interpersonal relationships of the members of a formal organisation and there are formal leaders who have authority because of the existence of a formal organisation as well as informal leaders who may be given deference by the employees because they have been able to assist in the satisfaction of some of their needs. Some of the leaders of informal groups or the 'workers of influence' can hold rather ordinary positions in the formal organisations but can be a force to be reckoned with because of their leadership of the informal organisation even though this leadership may be temporary or in transition.

Without any formal mandate, leadership in the informal group may be based on knowledge, past services, seniority, personality attribute and the art of inducing compliance, a power relationship, the desire for the achievement of a goal or the emerging result of group interactions. Generally, groups do not act because there are leaders but they acquire leaders to help them act. In a free environment, the leader of the informal group will be the individual who will have a reciprocally rewarding relationship with the rest of the group.

However, just like any other leader, the leader of the informal group will have a guiding vision, enthusiasm and a passion for action, integrity, maturity, knowledge, candour, trust, curiosity and daring. The reason why an informal group leader may not have succeeded in the organisation's formal management structure could be due to a lack of formal qualifications or money and they may be perceived to be belonging to a different 'class' which is distinct from the formal managerial core. Power in the informal groups is vested by the peers and informal group leadership has influence over their members as well as the capability to exert an influence over managerial decision making. Hence, an informal organisation exists in parallel to the formal organisation and there is informal status that can be conferred on members of the organisation as distinct from the formal status in an organisation [Sandra 2004]; [Onepine.Info 2005]

The development of formal as well as informal groups can be described in terms of Tuckman's five-stage model consisting of the stages of forming or the process of group formation, storming in which individual search and conflicts occur, norming or the normalising of relationships between group members, performing during which peak group activity takes place and adjourning a stage when group members leave and are replaced by others. At the informal group level, where personal relationships are more significant, factors related to sociometry or the science within psychodrama may influence the informal relations between actors apart from considerations related to gain or protection from threats.

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The basic notion behind sociometry is the flow of feelings which can attract or repel individuals to each other and this is used to explain the inner structures of groups which also have an outer structure. The outer structure of a group may not fulfil the needs of the group members although such a structure will reflect the decision and responsibility structure of the group and attention should also be placed on relationships of attraction between members without which a group can lose its creative life. In a hospital ward, for instance, the formal structures consist of the nursing supervisors who are in charge of the ward and the doctors, but there is an element of interaction between the patients who are all in the ward because they have a need to get well and be looked after while they try to achieve this aim.

There are no formal groups which have been put in place by the administration in a ward, but patients will tend to form informal groups because of their likes and dislikes as well as a need to cope with and survive their experience of ill health and get better. These informal groups will lend support to the members, help them when they need assistance, guide new members and may also take a stand against the formal administration of the ward consisting of the nurses and the doctors on duty if the interests of their members are threatened. [Diana 1996]; [Arndt 1997]; [Nathan 2004]

In this essay, an attempt has been made to take a look at perspectives associated with informal groups within organisations and to consider the dynamics of such informal groups. An emphasis has been placed on attempting to understand the dynamics of informal groups by considering the situation in a hospital ward in which patients have been placed because of a joint need to get well and informal groups are formed in order to satisfy the needs of members.

2.1 The Development of Informal Groups in Organisations

When creating formal groups in organisations, attempts are, or should be made to bring together individuals who are capable of harmoniously interacting with each other so that the group which has been created to accomplish a task can work at peak efficiency. In informal groups which are created spontaneously and not by an organisational dictate, the self interest of the individual members and a likeness for each other is what keeps the group together. Jacob L. Moreno (1892 - 1974) was the first to attempt to analyse group interactions using psychodrama and sociodrama, which are role playing techniques, in an attempt to analyse interpersonal relations.

Members of the group will interact with each other and the behaviour of the group will have a tendency to modify the behaviour of the individual members, as was observed by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947). Most informal groups are controlled through leadership and the group discipline is maintained through internal pressure. In most informal groups, there is a respect for the individual and all members can participate in deciding things which are affecting them. However, once rules have been made, disobedience in certain groups can carry heavy penalties. Prison gangs are also a form of a group in which force and terror is used by the informal prison organisation to make members join and the penalty for disobedience can be very heavy.

Hence, it is important for formal authorities to ensure that informal groups operating in an organisation are operating in a healthy and constructive manner with any conflict with the established authority lying within manageable and legal limits. Extreme behaviour in a group should be of concern to the law enforcement authorities and the group can no longer be described as an informal group. The humanist philosophy of Abraham Maslow (1908 - 1970) suggests that individuals are motivated by a dynamic hierarchy of needs including psychological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization, with individuals moving up or down the ladder in order to satisfy their needs as best as possible.

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These needs of individuals are what keep informal groups together and in a hospital ward situation, the patients form informal groups in order to satisfy these wants. Responsibility, recognition and opportunities for growth along with opportunities for self actualization which cannot be satisfied in the formal organisation because of the specialisation of labour and command / obey directives as well as the control of activities are amongst the reasons why individuals in an organisation may want to join informal groups. According to Douglas McGregor (1906 -64), the average individual does not dislike work and has an acute interest in attempting to present solutions for organisational problems which can also motivate individuals to form informal groups.

The strict division of labour in a formal organisation without the participation of the organisational members and the resulting dissatisfaction can also lead to the creation of informal groups in which members can participate and which have the capability to provide stronger inputs to the formal organisational hierarchies. There are many other evolving needs such as those involved with safeguarding the family, the community and the self in a hostile or alien ambience which can cause individuals to form informal groups. Examples of such tendencies may include groups formed by expatriate workers or their spouses in foreign lands. [Arndt 1997]; [Malcolm 2000]; [Tim 2001]; [Betty 1997]

In formal groups, there is a greater emphasis on task or goal-oriented activities which aim to get the job done rather than the maintenance-oriented activities which involve creating a good atmosphere, creating social relationships and the general happiness as well as a state of well being for the members. The emphasis on task-oriented activities rather than the maintenance-oriented activities, however, does not mean that the maintenance-oriented activities are irrelevant. In fact every group tries to find a balance between the two and in a formal group, neglecting the maintenance-oriented activities can mean that the overall group starts to malfunction or a member who may be quite proficient at doing the job is not much of a success any longer. In an informal group, maintenance-oriented activities can be more important than they are in a formal group, although informal groups do have broad aims behind their creation. [Arndt 1997]; [Thomas 2004]

All groups including informal groups exhibit a state of dynamism with new members arriving, getting accepted into the group, coming to terms with their status within the group, contributing and then leaving because they have found new places to go to or have developed new interests. Members must, however, have a reason to become apart of an informal group and most often the reason is that they have to be in the organisation to satisfy their economic wants or have been put into a situation or a place in which joining the local group can be beneficial. As new members of an organisation arrive on the scene, they are exploring and finding meanings in the new environment.

Initial social contacts are limited and mostly existing members of the informal group will sound out the new arrivals, offer clarifications and provide support. In the forming stage of the group, dependency is rather high and the group leadership may want to exploit the situation in order to induct new members. In the storming stage, the new individual member will start to exert their individuality and begin to come to terms with other members of the group and the group's values as well as mode of operation. Personal conflicts can occur as differences in the roles and personalities of members are resolved. There can be competitions over status and positions as well as roles and responsibilities.

A hostile environment can develop with members coming to term with reality. The position and the role of the informal group leaders and hierarchy may be questioned by the new arrivals but a realisation may sink in that there are benefits to be attained by the individual as well as the group because the members cannot all leave immediately. Dialogue, facilitation, coaching as well as discovery may take place as the group moves towards normalcy. In the norming stage, a

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level of understanding between members will develop after the new information and facts have been processed with an acceptance of the differences. Cooperative patterns will start to emerge in the group which are broadly acceptable and members will start discussing issues and making decisions on consensus.

Tensions which had existed will start to disappear as group cohesion grows, although feelings of disenchantment may occur as a reaction towards authority of the formal organisation and the group leadership. The group members will try to become independent and adjust the norms of the group to be broadly suited to all and there may be a tendency to attack the group leadership in order to bring in greater democracy. [Arndt 1997]; [Robert 2002]

The group will tend to move towards performing in line with its broad aims after the process of normalisation and will carry on with its day to day existence. The group members will have settled into their roles and will be valued for their talents and the contributions that they may be able to make to the group. Ways of improving the situation and enhancing the levels of happiness for all may be pondered on and implemented along with ways to neutralise any threats. Individual members may move towards building up better relationships with others in the group that they like.

Excitement may once again enter into the group as a result of new members joining and some old members leaving because they have to move to new places that are located far from the place where a group is functioning. Adjournments from the group may be marked with rituals such as a dinner, a drink or a last conversation, with some members looking back while others looking towards their future. Departure of old members and the induction of new members can move the group into an earlier stage in its dynamics with members coming to terms with new realities, roles and changes in the group composition. Loss of some departed members may be deeply felt and certain new members can be very refreshing, bringing in new ideas and to challenges to the group norms. [Onepine.Info 2005]; [Arndt 1997]

3.1 Sociometry at Work in Informal Group Interactions

Interpersonal relationships in a group are important because they enable individuals in a group to perform their function and contribute to the objective of the group. Poor relationships in any group can cause a gulf to develop between the members or the group leaders and between members resulting in poor performance. Members may leave groups in which there are poor interpersonal relations or they may want to keep away from the activities of such groups. In formal groups, absenteeism, sick leave and poor work attitude may be the result of poor interpersonal relationships while an informal group can disintegrate in such a situation.

Tele or the two-way flow of feeling, as distinct from empathy or transference which are one-way flow of feelings is the basis of individuals forming relationships and coming together to pursue common aims. Individuals are drawn together spontaneously by common motives in order to achieve certain aims. The forces of mutual attraction can be constantly changing within a group with individuals coming closer on the basis of various criteria. Hence, there are likely to be a number of constantly changing sub-groups within a group, with the group being kept together by a stronger common goal. The forces of tele may determine who may be found sitting to whom, the person whose advice is sought on problems and the member who is seen to be providing the leadership in a group.

Members in a group may have relationships based on dependency, mutual respect and pairing or indecisive fight or flight type relations with a group's leadership. The identity of an individual within a group will contain identities from many other groups including identities related to family, profession and place of residence, previous affiliations related

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to education, employment or membership of clubs as well as any special experiences including those related to culture.

Individuals who are thinking of forming stronger affiliations with a group will be asking themselves questions related to inclusion as well as identity, control, influence, power and acceptance as well as intimacy. Attempts will be made to determine what an individual can become in a group, how much influence or control an individual may be able to exercise and if the individual will be liked and respected. Based on the answers to these questions and the alternatives that are likely to be available, the individual will form a relationship with a group.

If a member's expectations related to the group are responded to positively then greater energy is likely to result, alternatively anxiety and preoccupation with the self and a lack of interest may be the result of thwarted expectations. Strong group cohesion is likely if individuals are drawn to each other as a result of more than one factors of common interest which are enduring and not of transitory nature. Cohesion is demonstrated by spontaneity, sincerity and enthusiasm. Observing and analysing the affection, trust and advice networks in a group can assist in the determination of what is going on in a group and who is likely to be able to influence group behaviour and values.

Such knowledge can be useful if the formal organisation wants to change the behaviour patterns of an informal group to be less damaging or supportive of the aims of the formal organisation. [Diana 1996]; [Robert 2002]; [John 1998]

In a formal organisation, it is the informal networks of working relationships and the informal groups which can have a bearing on productivity and resistance to change. Managers must, therefore, try to keep the informal organisation in mind when implementing change and making decisions. It is important to know the key members of informal groups and have some sort of a dialogue and channels of communication open with them so that discussions based on reason may be initiated if there is a need to change some behaviour patterns.

Misunderstandings, a lack of communication and dissatisfaction with some decisions of the formal organisational managers and their way of working can result in the informal network attempting to work in a manner that is contrary to the interests of the formal management and the organisation. Indications that this is happening may manifest itself in the form of apathy, a lack of interest in work and communications with the formal managers. Members of the informal groups may try to conduct secret discussions in order to try and find a solution and there can be a sense of disillusionment with the organisation.

Such wars are usually not healthy either for the organisation or the workers and the formal organisation can try to conduct a dialogue with the informal organisation in order to discuss and explain matters which may improve the situation. [Cristiano 2004]; [Diana 1996]; [David 2001]; [John 1998]

Some informal groups in an organisation may not have aims which are contrary to the interest of the organisation. Informal groups of professionals who may want to enhance their knowledge, knowledge workers, managers, sports and hobby groups etc can actually greatly benefit the organisational capabilities as well as prestige. Such groups can also assist the organisation by furthering their skills and using these skills to assist organisational aims such as those related to product design, management, marketing, sales etc. The formal organisation may choose to assist such groups within the resources that are available to the organisation. [Kristina 1999]; [Andrew 2004]; [John 1998]

In the next section, an attempt is made to study the dynamics of informal groups in a hospital ward. Such a study can be

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instructive because a hospital ward is likely to be a place where the most idealised informal group formation is possible with there being a possibility of far fewer harsh forces at work in the hospital ward as compared to other settings.

4.1 Informal Groups in a Hospital Ward

Treating and caring for the ill can be a challenging occupation and depending on the nature of the ward being considered, there can be a certain level of tension between the hospital staff and the patients. The nurses in the ward are more directly involved with the patients and come in contact with them far more often. The doctors are the senior managers of the formal hierarchy and remain relatively distant from the action whereas the patients and informal groups made up by the patients is the informal organisation.

A children's ward is the place where there is a minimal level of tension between the formal organisation and informal organisation consisting of the relatives of the sick kids. The kids themselves are too young to be making rational informal groups. Caring for the mentally ill or for adult patients in a deprived economic environment can result in serious frictions being generated between the ward staff and the groups formed by patients. Mentally ill patients can be very demanding while the adult patients may not be receiving the proper care in a deprived hospital because of a lack of resources. The circumstances presented in the novel *Cancer Ward* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn are instructive in this regard. [Valerie 2000]; [Harborne 1996]; [Sandford 1990]; [Ann 2004]

In most hospitals, however, a genuine attempt is made to care for the patients and depending on the formal culture which has been cultivated as a result of the policies of the senior medical staff of the hospital, the relationship between the formal ward organisation and the patients tend to be friendly and cooperative. Informal groups consisting of patients, however, do spring up because there is a need to be helpful and be helped, pass time, converse and help each other to face the common enemy, the illness, as well as any other threats which may present themselves including the attitude of the ward staff. [Harborne 1996]; [Sandford 1990]; [Ann 2004]

The arrival of a new patient generates an interest amongst the existing members of the ward and as the new arrival is investigated by the ward patients, the process of the forming of a new group starts. The newly arrived patient in the ward will initially be assisted by the formal ward staff or the nurses and will slowly get to know the other patients. The leaders of the informal patient groups may also express an interest and assist in the resettlement of the newly arrived, gathering information and making an assessment of the new patient.

The formal ward administration will know much more about the patient because they will have their particulars and medical records. Any factors in common between two patients in the ward including similar medical conditions, close neighbourhoods, cultural experiences or professional background etc will lead to an attraction or tele between two individuals which can assist in the formation of an informal group. An attraction or tele can also exist between a patient and a member of the formal organisation such as a nurse if there are any common backgrounds or interests. Norming of the ward takes place when the newly arrived patient starts to fit into the new environment and slowly gets to know the other members.

In the storming phase, there may be personality clashes or debates about ward regulations and perhaps attempts to deliberately flout any regulations of the ward such as restrictions on smoking or meeting with others as a result of the attempts by the new members to personalise the ward space. The performing stage occurs with ward members settling

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down and helping each other while trying to get better. Sub-groups will be constantly formed and re-formed as the process of discovery continues and mutual interests shift.

A member who has been through trying times, undergone a painful procedure or an operation may be given extra attention by the group as a whole and especially by those who have a strong attraction or tele with this member. The nursing staff, doctors, the senior medical staff as well as the administrators can judiciously intervene by conducting a dialogue and reasoning to keep the situation in the ward under control in order to maintain healthy relationships amongst the patients as well as between the patients and the ward staff. The ward group is adjourned with the departure of a patient and ritual farewell meetings or exchange of gifts may take place for those who have recovered, while some ritual mourning and remembrance will be present for those who may not have recovered.

Informal groups in a ward can act in a protective manner towards their members, the patients, while collectively standing up against threats or the unreasonable behaviour of the ward staff. Occasionally, an informal group of patients may threaten the discipline of the ward and the formal medical staff will have to find ways to bring this group in greater harmony with the aims of the hospital and the ward. [Valerie 2000]; [John 1998]; [Sandford 1990]; [Ann 2004]

In the next section, an attempt has been made to determine how the formal organisation can deal with informal groups and encourage them to constructively work for the betterment of the group as well as the organisation.

5.1 The Formal Organisation and Informal Groups

A large organisation can contain many informal groups in departments and sections. Some of these groups can be very harmless and in fact have norms that are beneficial to the organisation. Other groups may be powerful and appear as a counterforce to the formal organisational hierarchy. It is important for departmental and section managers of the formal organisation to keep an eye on the informal groups which may exist in their areas of responsibility. Information related to group norms, membership and leadership as well as any networks of authority, advice and member attractions should be discretely acquired. It may be possible for the organisation to assist groups with positive aims and objectives which can assist the organisation.

Groups with destructive norms will need to be changed, possibly by dialogue with members of influence. A normative profile related to attributes of the group which may include attributes related to performance, communications, leadership, work ethics, relationship with colleagues, training etc may be developed. This can assist in the determination of what needs to be changed and how. With most reasonable informal groups, a process of dialogue, teaching and learning can help with bringing about a positive change. However, occasionally groups with extremist philosophies may need to be broken by transferring the leadership or resorting to the law. However, it is important to realise that the formal organisational structures and management are expected to be moral and ethical otherwise resistance against established hierarchies in the formal organisation will continue to erode the organisation. [Cristiano 2004]; [Accel-Team.com 2004]; [Malcolm 2000]; [John 1998]; [Onepine.Info 2005]

6.1 Conclusion

Every formal organisation with formal groups and managerial hierarchies will also have an informal structure consisting of informal groups whose membership is based on the mutual interests of the members. Leadership and position in

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such groups is not delegated by the formal organisation but is based on the acceptance and desires of the members of the group. The informal organisation and informal groups within the organisation are important and need to be kept in mind by organisational managers when initiating change or making decisions. It is possible for informal groups within the organisation to contribute positively to the aims of the organisation and informal group norms can be brought more in line with those of the organisation through a process dialogue and reasoning with networks of influence within the group.

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