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INTERGROUP PROCESSES

SCHEIN, E.

One of the most important and least studied aspects of organizational process is intergroup relations within an organization. It is no longer an issue whether or not groups form in organizations. The evidence is overwhelming that they do—along formal departmental lines, along geographical lines, and in terms of who has to interact with whom in the course of getting the work done. It is also well known that groups develop norms, that members feel loyal to their groups and adopt the norms, and that the goals of different groups sometimes run at cross-purposes with each other.

What is relatively less well known are the consequences of such group behavior in terms of costs or benefits to the organization as a whole. For example, many managers will argue that they want various departments to compete with each other because it improves the level of motivation of each group. Other managers will argue that they cannot afford to have departments compete with each other because if they did they would not produce the best possible joint product. I have heard still other managers argue that groups do not have any significant effect on motivation, productivity, or morale, and hence can be discounted.

STUDYING GROUP PROCESSES

Part of the problem of making sense of this area is that the key processes are relatively invisible. If the engineering department has poor relations

with the production department, the production men might be motivated *not* to correct errors which they find in the drawings given to them; without the excuse of ignorance, therefore, they deliberately produce bad products. The ultimately bad product is visible enough, but the lack of interest on the part of the production worker (who failed to correct what he knew was a fault) is hard to observe; it is a private decision on his part *not* to do something. Similarly, the giving of false information or the withholding of information, which typically results from groups competing with each other in a win-lose situation, is difficult to observe, even when one suspects strongly that it is there.

The process consultant can use a variety of techniques in an effort to learn about such intergroup processes.

1. He can interview members of each group about their feelings toward the other group and can inquire how they translate these feelings into overt behavior.

2. He can try to observe meetings or settings where members of both groups are present and assess the degree of openness of communication, spirit of cooperation, etc.

3. He can try to theorize what should happen between the groups and check his theories by observing specific situations. For example, if relationships are good, he would theorize that errors by one group would be sympathetically and helpfully dealt with by the other group. He can then try to find an incident where an error occurred and either observe what happens, or, if the incident is past, ask what happened at the time.

4. A final and more complicated method for assessing and working on intergroup process is to arrange an intergroup exercise of some sort. One model which was developed by Robert Blake involves the following steps:

a) Each group separately describes its own image of itself and its image of the other group.

b) Through representatives these images are then reported by each group to the other. Both groups now have some new data about how they are perceived by each other.

c) The next stage is not to react, but to meet separately to consider what kind of behavior on the part of each group may have led to the image which the other group holds.

What Happens Between the Competing Groups?

1. Each group begins to see the other groups as the enemy, rather than merely a neutral object.
2. Each group begins to experience distortions of perception: it tends to perceive only the best parts of itself, denying its weaknesses, and tends to perceive only the worst parts of the other group, denying its strengths. Each group is likely to develop a negative stereotype of the other ("they don't play fair the way we do").
3. Hostility toward the other group increases while interaction and communication with the other group decrease; thus it becomes easier to maintain negative stereotypes and more difficult to correct perceptual distortions.
4. If the groups are forced into interaction—for example, if they are forced to listen to representatives plead their own and the others' cause in reference to some task—each group is likely to listen more closely to their own representative and not to listen to the representative of the other group, except to find fault with his presentation; in other words, group members tend to listen only for that which supports their own position and stereotype.

After a decision has been rendered what happens to the winner and loser?

What happens to the winner?

1. Winner retains its cohesion and may become even more cohesive.
2. Winner tends to release tension, lose its fighting spirit, become complacent, casual, and playful (the "fat and happy" state).
3. Winner tends toward high intragroup cooperation and concern for members' needs, and low concern for work and task accomplishment.
4. Winner tends to be complacent and to feel that winning has confirmed the positive stereotype of itself and the negative stereotype of the "enemy" group; there is little basis for reevaluating perceptions, or reexamining group operations in order to learn how to improve them.

What happens to the loser?

1. If the situation permits because of some ambiguity in the decision (say, if judges have rendered it or if the game was close), there is a

strong tendency for the loser to deny or distort the reality of losing; instead, the loser will find psychological escapes like "the judges were biased," "the judges didn't really understand our solution," "the rules of the game were not clearly explained to us," "if luck had not been against us at the one key point, we would have won," and so on.

2. If the defeat is accepted, the losing group tends to splinter, unresolved conflicts come to the surface, and fights break out, all in the effort to find a cause for the loss.

3. Loser is more tense, ready to work harder, and desperate to find someone or something to blame—the leader, the group itself, the judges who decided against them, the rules of the game (the "lean and hungry" state).

4. Loser tends toward low intragroup cooperation, low concern for members' needs, and high concern for recouping by working harder.

5. Loser tends to learn a lot about itself as a group because the positive stereotype of itself and the negative stereotype of the other group are upset by the loss, forcing a reevaluation of perceptions; as a consequence, the loser is likely to reorganize and become more cohesive and effective, once the loss has been accepted realistically.

It is far easier to prevent reactions and feelings such as these by not arranging a competitive reward structure in the first place, than it is to undo them once they have become established. The process consultant must find ways of bringing relevant data to the attention of the manager so that he can see for himself that a motivational system which seems sound can have pitfalls in it. If the situation has become competitive and destructive, remedial measures such as those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter may have to be tried.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES.

The process consultant finds himself, through his observation of managerial behavior, witness to a variety of other organizational processes besides the ones we have looked at. For example, he sees how managerial decisions in the areas of accounting, budgeting, and controlling will signal to the organization the degree to which subordinates are or are not trusted. The manner in which managers administer performance-appraisal plans or bonus plans also communicates a great deal about their

assumptions, and therefore has an immediate as well as long-range effect on the organization. The kind of career planning which is done, the use of training or development activities, the policies for recruitment and job placement, all have implications for how people will feel, how they will relate to each other, and how they will carry out their work.

It is beyond the scope of this volume to treat each of these process areas in detail. For the present I merely wish to note that there are a variety of other processes to which the consultant must pay attention and which he must assess if he is to help the organization become more effective. I have deliberately concentrated on the more immediate kinds of process which one sees in face-to-face relations because these are the most accessible and the most likely to produce important behavior change. If organization members can change their behavior in their immediate relations, this will inevitably produce more far-reaching effects organizationally. Even more important, if managers can learn how to diagnose organizational processes better, they can continue to modify their behavior after the consultant is no longer present.

SUMMARY

We have looked briefly at some intergroup and total organizational processes. Of especial importance are the conditions which are set up for groups within organizations leading to competition or collaboration. The problems of internal competition were spelled out, and it was noted how much more difficult it is to undo these effects than to avoid them in the first place. The process consultant must play an active role in encouraging managers to think through their approach to intergroup relations.