

1.5: Group Norms

Learning Objectives

1. Define group norms
2. Discuss the role and function of group norms
3. Discuss the effect of group norms on a group's development

A new vice president came into an organization. At the end of her first weekly meeting with her staff members, she tossed a nerf ball to one of them and asked the person to say how she was feeling. When that person finished, the vice president asked her to toss the ball to someone else, and so on, until everyone had expressed himself or herself. This process soon became a regular feature of the group's meetings.

In our earlier section on group life cycles, you learned about Bruce Tuckman's model of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Along with roles, status, and trust, which we'll encounter in the next chapter, norms are usually generated and adopted after a group's "forming" and "storming" stages.

As a group moves from "forming" toward "performing," then, norms help guide its members along the way. Whether we see them or not, norms are powerful predictors of a group's behavior.

What Norms Are

Group norms are rules or guidelines that reflect expectations of how group members should act and interact. They define what behaviors are acceptable or not; good or not; right or not; or appropriate or not (O'Hair, D. & Wiemann, M.O. (2004). *The essential guide to group communication*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's).

Norms may relate to how people look, behave, or communicate with each other. Tossing a nerf ball around a circle of workers is perhaps a peculiar way to start a meeting, and it probably doesn't contribute directly to achieving substantive goals, but it did represent a norm in the vice president's group we described—which, by the way, was a real group and not a product of imagination!

Some norms relate to how a group as a whole will act—e.g., when and how often it will meet, for instance. Others have to do with the behavior of individual group members and the roles those members play within the group.

By defining what social behavior lies within acceptable boundaries, norms can help a group function smoothly and face conflict without falling apart (Hayes, p. 31). Hayes, N. (2004). *Managing teams: A strategy for success*. London: Thomson. Thus, they can constitute a potent force to promote positive interaction among group members.

Origin of Norms

In a new group, norms may arise organically as members settle into their relationships and start to function together. Decisions need to be made and time needs to be taken for diverse activities such as identifying goals, determining tasks, and allocating human and tangible resources. Who will take the lead on these areas of the group's behavior has to be determined.

Further questions need to be answered as the group gets off the ground. Here are some examples:

- What topics are and are not appropriate for the group to discuss?
- How and to what degree will members respect and attend to each other's statements and viewpoints?
- How and when, if ever, will the group behave casually?
- What mechanisms will the group use to solve problems?

Any group eventually needs to deal with these questions, and the answers it reaches will become embodied as norms.

Implicit Norms

Whether a group is new or not, its norms aren't always expressed or discussed. People may simply assume that certain norms exist and accept them "by unspoken consent" (Galanes, G., & Adams, K. (2013). *Effective group discussion: Theory and practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill). in which case they are implicit norms.

Consider "same seat syndrome," for example. How often have you found that people in a college classroom seem to gravitate every day to exactly the same chairs they've always sat in? Nobody says, "Hey, I've decided that this will be my chair forever" or "I see

that that's your territory, so I'll never sit there," do they?

Often norms are difficult for group members to express in words. What topics are okay or not okay to talk about during informal "chit-chat" may be a matter of unstated intuition rather than something that people can readily describe. Nevertheless, implicit norms may be extremely powerful, and even large groups are apt to have at least some implicit norms.

The cultural background each member brings to a group may lie beneath conscious awareness, yet it may exert a powerful influence on both that person's and the group's behavior and expectations. Just as a fish is unaware that it lives in water, a person may easily go through life and participate in group interactions without perceiving that he or she is the product of a culture.

Explicit Norms

Sometimes group norms are stated outright, either orally or in writing; then they are explicit norms. Such explicit rules may be imposed by an authority figure such as an executive or designated team leader. They may be part of formal policies or regulations. Wearing a uniform or answering the telephone in a certain way, for instance, may be written requirements in a workplace group.

Manuals, and even books, have been composed to provide members of groups with norms of how to behave. A manager in one organization we know wrote a policy in response to almost every problem or difficulty his division experienced. Because the manager served for more than 15 years in his position, the collection of these incident-based policies eventually filled a large tabbed binder. The bigger the group, the more likely it is that its norms will be rigid and explicit like these (Lamberton, L., & Minor-Evans, L. (2002). *Human relations: Strategies for success* (2nd ed.). New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill).

Table 1.5.1 Implicit, Explicit, Individual, and Whole-Group Norms.

	Individual	Whole-Group
Explicit	Each new member receives a copy of the group's bylaws	The group keeps minutes of all its meetings
Implicit	A person should raise his/her hand to signal a desire to speak	Someone brings doughnuts or other treats every time the group meets

Interaction, Procedure, Status, and Achievement Norms

Norms may relate to four aspects of a group's identity: interaction, procedure, status, and achievement (Engleberg, I.N., & Wynn, D. R. (2013). *Working in groups* (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson). Let's look at each of these kinds of norms.

Interaction norms specify how people communicate in the group. Is it expected that everyone in the group should have an opportunity to speak about any topic that the group deals with? How long is it okay for one person to speak?

Procedure-oriented norms identify how the group functions. Does it hold meetings according to an established schedule? Who speaks first when the group gets together? Does someone distribute a written record of what happened after every time the group gets together?

Status norms indicate the degree of influence that members possess and how that influence is obtained and expressed. Who decides when a group discussion has concluded? When and how are officers for the group elected?

Achievement norms relate to standards the group sets for the nature and amount of its work. Must members cite readings or the comments of authorities when they make presentations to the group? What happens to a group member who completes tasks late or fails to complete them at all?

As we'll discover in the next chapter, enforcing and changing the norms of a group throughout its life cycle may present substantial challenges. Those challenges can best be overcome if members share a common understanding of their group's norms.

Key Takeaway

Group norms, whether explicit or implicit, underlie and affect almost all aspects of a group's activities.

Exercise 1.5.1

1. Think of an unusual norm you've encountered in a group you were part of. Do you know how and from whom it originated? If not, what is your speculation about its origin?
2. Identify an implicit norm in a group you were part of. Would it have been a good idea to make the norm explicit instead? Why or why not?
3. Describe a group norm you've experienced that dealt with either interaction, procedure, status, or achievement.

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