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NEW MANAGEMENT AND OLD EMPLOYEES: THE IMPLICATIONS OF GROUP DIFFERENTIATION ON EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

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Abstract

In organisations, groups exist as a product of organisational structure. However, individuals are attracted to groups for reasons associated with their role in the workplace as well as gaining opportunities to meet socio-emotional needs. In the Latrobe Region organisational groups have changed as a result of organisational change. Focusing in particular on the introduction of new management teams into organisations, this paper seeks to explore employee and management groups in the workplace. Qualitative data collected throughout the course of this research found that the introduction of new management teams in the Latrobe Region was concurrent with the development of boundaries between management and employees. Research participants argue that the development of such boundaries has adversely affected employment relations by not involving employees in organisational processes they were once included in. Using social identity theory, the rationale behind inter-group boundaries is explored.

The lack of employee participation in organisational operations has led to demise in relations between new management teams and existing employees. Participants believe that their skills and knowledge of implementing change have been overlooked and that position power has decreased subsequent to the introduction of new managers. The data also indicates that employees feel pressured to display appropriate behaviour in the company of management and that constant inter-group differentiation has adversely impacted on morale and motivation to work towards organisational goals. Managers need to be aware of the implications of boundary development between themselves and employees. While differentiation between these groups exists, it may be questionable as to how long-term positive employment relations can be fostered.

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INTRODUCTION

In the organisational context, groups exist for a variety of reasons including occupational differences, hierarchical levels or the division of workers into shifts. As well as role related functions, individuals are attracted to groups as a means of satisfying social and emotional needs (Hogg, 1992). This research formulates part of a larger thesis, thus only gives a very brief look at groups in the organisation. Qualitative data for this research was collected from twenty-five participants from the health care, electricity supply, paper manufacturing, education and water industries in the Latrobe Region. Participants ranging from positions of middle management to shopfloor levels of the organisation were included in the study. Interviews of approximately one hour were conducted between August 1998 and September 1999 in an attempt to gain an understanding of an employees' experience of organisational change. The issues emphasised in this paper are a reflection of issues raised by participants throughout the course of the research and focus on the features of groups that were considered as significant in the majority of the interviews.

This paper looks at employee and management groups in the organisation following the introduction of new management teams as a process of organisational change. In particular it focuses on the development and maintenance of boundaries between employees and management and the implications that such boundaries may have on employment relations in the workplace. However, prior to this discussion, the relevance of group membership from a social identity perspective is explained.

GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Other then the physical proximity of individuals employed in an organisation, employees are also faced with the psychological boundaries of different groups and sub-groups. While individuals in the workplace become members of such groups as a result of the nature of the work and their role in the organisation they also seek to form meaningful social relationships with colleagues (Hogg, 1992). Anderson (1975:69) further suggests that individuals enter groups as a result of both task-related functions and socio-emotional functions. Task related functions consist of the role that the individual plays in the organisation, and its associated tasks. However, in addition to task related functions, socio-emotional functions enable members to derive 'emotional satisfaction' or 'support for one's self-conception' through participation in the group (Anderson, 1975:69).

The importance of social relationships and membership in appropriate groups in the organisation became evident from interview data collected over the course of this research. Participants were encouraged to give a narrative of their experiences of organisational change and focus on the factors they considered to be most important to them. The concept of social relationships and group membership in the workplace was considered to be an important factor that significantly influences an individual's reaction to organisational change. Research participants also considered that membership of the "right" group in the organisation would enable them to have access to more information and be able to play a role in the organisational change process. However, before moving further into the discussion of group membership, it is essential to recognise the concept of social identity theory and its relevance to groups.

Social identity is defined by Abrams and Hogg (1990:196) as 'the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of that group membership'. The emphasis of social identity theory is on the concept of belonging to what the individual considers to be the "right" group. As an individual becomes aware a social group in which they wish to become a member, they attempt to identify with and enact appropriate behaviours accepted by the group. This is usually an attempt by the individual to align their personal values with those of the group (Hogg, 1992). If personal values differ vastly from group values, the individual will be considered to be part of the "out-group" by "in-group" members. In society in general, membership of the out-group may not be

considered to be particularly disadvantageous. However, failure to become a member of the in-group, or to reflect the values of this group, in the organisational context may have a more detrimental effect on an individual. The stories constructed from the interview data suggest that a difference in goals between organisational groups with authority and those without can have a damaging impact on employment relations between management and employee groups.

Employees who participated in this research appeared to be divided into two specific groups: those who identified socially with the values of new management and those who did not. Often, individuals continued to socially identify with prior management groups. As a result, these employees reported feeling conflict between the social values they had worked with under the previous management and the values expected by new management. Anne, a middle manager in the health care industry, experienced such conflict. Anne had previously worked alongside senior management harmoniously but experienced difficulties when the values of new management differed from her own:

> Anne: I didn't respect the people I worked...with! I didn't want to be part of an administration team with the decision making that they were doing, which I thought was totally unethical! And I'd never been part of working with administrators who were doing devious things and treating people so abominably...I have no respect for their knowledge or ability and I didn't like the people, so I refused to enter into their game playing that was going on!

Anne clearly specifies that her personal value system is more important to her than the values of the new management group. This indicates a high level of personal salience. Abrams (1990) suggests that when an individual has a high level of personal salience they will be more inclined to behave according to their personal self-image. In order to behave according to the expectations of management, Anne would be required to show a higher level of social salience. As Abrams (1990:90) declares, 'when one's self-image as a group member is salient, one will behave as a group member'. The concept of personal and social salience is clearly explained by Thiots and Virshup (1994) who utilise the concept of "me's" and "we's" to explain the difference between personal and social identities. Personal-level identities (me's) are formed by the 'idiosyncratic experiences' of a person and contain the 'unique or highly specific details of biography' that are gained throughout a person's life. Social level identities (we's) are 'socially constructed' versions of the self that are 'descriptive' of the individual and 'their group' (Thiots and Virshup, 1997:106-107). While an individual's social identity contains elements of their personal identity, socially constructed identity traits are more salient within the social group as they provide meaning to the individual's behaviour and actions for other group members. Anne's experience in the prior passage displays more characteristics of the "me's" than the "we's" indicating that she places more importance on her personal self image than the image she is expected to display for the organisation.

The following passage shows an example of a transition from higher levels of personal salience to higher levels of social salience. In this example, Patricia identifies socially with the values of new managers and subsequently benefits from this by being promoted into a middle management position. Throughout her interview, Patricia often raised the point that she felt committed to the new management team from the start, which ultimately led to her promotion. However, the participant stressed that the change to the new management goals was not an easy transition and did initially cause her a lot of discomfort and uncertainty.

> Patricia: There was a lot of, you know...bitchiness...but the staff...have gotten used to change because change has become normal...So it's sort of like when they don't change things become uneasy...You only half believed [management] so you never really acted on anything...and there was a real clashing of wills! ...But the thing that has impacted most on me...is [the management] philosophy...you know you weren't encouraged in the same way that they encourage staff here...So even though I was one of the less experienced...that went [for promotion] I got it because of different reasons other than seniority...So...I quite enjoy the change process probably because I've had positive experiences...Not so good for other people!

The transition from a personal level identity to a social level identity requires the individual to move through a process of depersonalisation (Hogg, 1992). During this process the individual attempts to 'harmonize self and role' while 'remolding and reformulating others' expectations of his or her self' (Ebaugh, 1984:156-157)

in order to act in accordance with group norms. Depersonalisation will occur once an individual attempts to 'establish and maintain a positive self-image' (Abrams, 1990:89), which motivates them to gain membership into a more "superior" group. In Patricia's case, management encouragement enabled her to harmonise her personal goals with management goals. As a result, Patricia's social characteristics have become more salient as she moved through the depersonalisation process and has 'drawn attention away from the self' (Abrams, 1990:91) to focus on socially identifying with the values of management.

While Patricia's interview suggests that she has developed a social identity with the new management group, the case of Anne indicates that she has no intention of seeking membership into management. Abrams (1990:92) argues that 'focus on the private self encourages resistance to group pressure, whereas focus on the public self leads to conformity'. While Patricia displays perceptual and behavioural depersonalisation in terms of management norms (Hogg, 1992) Anne displays heterogeneous characteristics between herself and management. Rather than pressuring her to conform to group norms, management can choose to maintain the differences between groups if they are able to evaluate an advantage of having conformity in the in-group and differences between groups (Perez and Mugny, 1990). This theory is explored further in the following section.

KEEPING THE "IN" GROUP IN AND THE "OUT" GROUP OUT

While group members may attempt to maintain the status quo with the group in which they belong to, they may also endeavour to maintain the differences that exist between their group and individuals that do not belong to that group (Hogg, 1992). Out-group members may belong to other social groups within the organisational structure that are considered to be lower on the organisational hierarchy (van Knippenberg, 1999). For a group to view itself as superior to out groups it must 'construct positive social identities' and compare itself 'favourably to relevant out groups' (Hinkle and Brown, 1990:53) while developing and maintaining boundaries to preserve the differences between the superior group and the less superior group. The development of such inter-group boundaries is evident in the process of organisational change and has been briefly introduced in the previous section.

Participants reported that throughout the process of change it was not uncommon for them to become more concerned with looking after their own needs before the goals of the organisation. The change in management also led to a change in the social systems within the organisation and, as a result, required individuals to 'collectively recognize' (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991: 518) and re-define new social structures within the workplace. Changed social structures and organisational cultures cause individuals to re-negotiate their social identities within the workplace. As mentioned previously in this paper, individuals who were once able to align their identities and goals with those of the organisation may find a vast difference between personal value and goal systems and those of new management. Such differences may lead management to develop and maintain boundaries in order to emphasise the differences between themselves and employees. For example, Anne had a high degree of position and decision making power in her role with the previous management team. However, when it became evident to the new management team that Anne did not identify with the new organisational goals her decision making power was removed:

> Anne: What did distress me was the fact that the day to day working went on behind the scenes and I was excluded from the executives and the decision making that I had enjoyed and been part of prior to that. I found it very difficult to every step of the way be ignored or denied opportunities to discuss issues or try to put across alternative rationale...And it was the lack of support and the lack of communication and the lack of respect that was really perturbing from the executive. I was one of three staff who spearheaded an en masse staff process of going through looking at restructuring...and we did come up with a proposal...that was quite innovative at the time and quite cost effective. It wasn't wanted because it came from my staff! And it was interesting to see further down the track that a number of the recommendations that were put forward...did eventually come to pass because they were recognised that they had been implemented elsewhere and they were the preferred option elsewhere and therefore that made it legitimate. Whereas they hadn't [been] accepted coming from my staff!

Anne's statement suggests that the removal of her decision making power is a way of keeping her "out" of the decision making role with new management. All interview participants reported that they perceived the implementation of an in-group and out-group culture with the introduction of new management teams. Participants also believed that this culture saw the development of strategies to separate employees from management. Another case of boundary development between management and employees is evident in the following example. This participant stated that the new management team would not include local employees in the change process, as they believed training completed in the Latrobe Region was not up to the same standards as training in metropolitan areas:

> Steven: [They had] parochial views on country people and so dismissed a lot of forethought and planning with broad-brush strokes. [They see us as] all having two heads and we're academically and intellectually tarred and we couldn't possibly know anything! ...It's difficult with someone who will tell you "what am I going to do with these people, they're all hopeless! They're the most useless pack I've ever known! There's no way that they're having anything to do with the running of this place!" And there are some really inspirational, hard working people there!

A further example of boundaries between groups is found in the following data from the interview given by Kelvin. Kelvin stated that he became disillusioned by the actions of the new managers when they constantly changed the information they gave them in regards to job security:

> Kelvin: Management walks in and says "oh well we're all sacked by next week! Don't worry about it, we're all sacked!" A couple of days later another manager walks in, "your jobs are safe as houses, you're going to be looked after well". Then another one walks in, "Oh we're all sacked!" Just like that! Day in, day out! No clues, rumours were everywhere...I just couldn't handle the bullshit that was going on [and]...they [management] had a good idea of what was going on!

Social identity and group theorists suggest that the examples given by participants are typical strategies developed by the in-group to maintain differences between themselves and the out-group (Perez and Mugny, 1990). Traditionally, members of the in-group are seen to be superior in comparison to those who do not have group membership and as such, the assumption is made that non-members strive to join the superior group (Brewer, 1993). Therefore, new management teams in this case may attempt to maintain the differences between their group and prior management groups as a means to developing progressive strategy for the organisation with minimal amounts of conflict and resistance from employees. In this situation, employees in the organisation will either strive to join the new management group or will also develop and maintain boundaries to avoid change (Johnston and Hewson, 1990). However, evidence from the data suggests that even though employees may identify with the new management team, management may still focus on the differences between their group and the rest of the organisation.

Two major schools of thought have researched inter-group differences. Brewer (1993:159) suggests that differences between groups can be caused simply by the out-groups' failure to 'engage social identification with the in-group'. Inter-group differences are then maintained by the "out-group homogeneity effect" (Mullen and Hu, 1989), which finds that the diversity of out-group members is less than that of the diversity of in-group members in the same organisation (Brewer, 1993). The issue of diversity and group variability leads into the second school of thought. Social identity theorists, such as Abrams and Hogg (1999); Abrams (1999); Turner et al (1987) and Tajfel (1981), argue that the differences between the in-group and the out-group are not necessarily a product of out-group homogeneity. Rather, inter-group differences are developed and maintained through the concept of self-categorisation and social comparison. As Brewer (1993:152) summarises, self-categorisation, as a psychological boundary between groups, requires the individual to compare and accentuate the 'intergroup differences' and the 'intragroup similarities'. The process of self-categorisation involves the individual perceiving and socially comparing 'their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and those of others' (Abrams and Hogg, 1992:91) and placing these in 'distinct groups' (Brewer, 1993:152). The aim of social comparison and self-categorisation is to 'make salient...normative behaviour' (Abrams and Hogg, 1992:91) which is expected of the individual regardless of whether they hold membership in the in-group or the out-group.

Self-categorisation and social comparison are further linked to the concept of relative deprivation. Tajfel (1978:69) defines relative deprivation as 'the actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities'. When experiencing relative deprivation the individual within the group compares the recognition of their capabilities to those of intergroup members. A deprived individual in the out-group may find that they are not being recognised or rewarded for their skills in comparison to other individuals within the in-group. This concept becomes more evident in the following passage when the subject of job reissuing was raised during one interview:

> MB: ...over the whole change process...what do you think the most significant thing would be that stands out in your mind?
>
> Chris: The jobs! The reissuing if you like of jobs! And I don't think that the way it was done is what should have been...I don't think that it was totally fair and equitable and I'm not sure that any job application [process] ever is...because I have actually gone for another job and I didn't get it and there was no doubt that I was the best person for that job! No doubt! And I didn't get the job! ...The frustrations [are]...they advertised and interviewed for all jobs up to the manager level yet all the [other jobs] were job matched. They weren't even interviewed!

While Chris held a middle management position in his organisation, he felt that he was considered as a member of the out-group by the new management team. Chris experienced relative deprivation in the fact that he was adequately equipped with the skills and experience to become employed in the new management team, but was not given the opportunity to apply for such a position. He felt that the use of job matching as a recruitment strategy was a means of keeping the out-group members from having any influence or decision making power within the workplace. This also further illustrates that although Chris sought membership in the in-group, the in-group developed boundaries to maintain the differences between themselves and Chris.

IMPLICATIONS OF GROUP DIFFERENCES ON EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

Management groups may justify boundary development between groups as an attempt to effectively manage the organisation. The inclusion of out-group members in management decision making may hinder management efforts through factors such as resistance to change and conflict (Robbins et al, 1998). However, management should consider the cost of maintaining differences between groups, particularly when considering employment relations in the workplace. One would assume that elements of social cohesion between groups would be necessary to encourage positive employment relations (Hogg, 1992). Issues such as trust, loyalty and commitment are necessary to foster positive employment relations and would be difficult to achieve with a constant focus on inter-group differences (Hinkle and Brown, 1990). Research participants believe that the constant division between groups has led to a permanent breakdown of relations between themselves and management. Although there are many different ways in which a breakdown of relations can be manifested, the most common issues raised by participants include ignorance of employee skills and knowledge and the need to exercise impression management.

Terry, Hogg and Duck (1999) suggest that although employees may not agree with management values, their attitudes do not necessarily guide their actions. This is evident in Jane's experience of change. Jane expressed that management goals were in conflict with her own goals. However, her love of her profession and her work ethic enabled her to continue to work in the best interests of the organisation. Jane was well equipped with the skills and knowledge to implement change and had played a significant role in previous change processes. However, management appeared to be ignorant to the skills that she could provide in implementing further change:

> Jane: I could see a very clear process of what was happening. I just was really frustrated with my knowledge of training and preparation that I couldn't find something that I could make work to work through the situation because it seemed as if all the rules were changed and there was just no logic! There was no rationale! And there was no recourse! There was no vehicle to communicate effectively and that sort of thing...But I'd learned about change management.

> That wasn't how it was being used! There it was almost as if it was intentionally...a change engine working in it's own completely devoid and not wanting any input from other people...All we were asking for was you know consultation. But definition of consultation was "you've been told!" How can I trust management anymore?

The lack of cohesion between management and employees evident in the prior passage can also affect the behaviour an individual will display in the workplace. Research participants often raised the point that while they may appear to be working in the interests of the organisation, they are more interested in looking after themselves. The constant frustration experienced through lack of respect, communication and participation from management towards participants caused them to display a form of impression management (Goffman, 1984) rather than strive for a 'positive social identity' (Hinkle and Brown, 1990:55) with management. As Goffman (1984:207) explains employees 'must act as if they have accepted certain moral obligations. They must not [be seen to] betray the secrets of the [organisation]...whether from self-interest, principle or lack of discretion'. In other words, employees must be seen to be acting in the interests of the organisation and thus should "hide" their conflict with other members of the workplace (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990). An example of impression management is clear in the following passage:

> George: I'm a sceptic! I don't trust anyone anymore. I might agree and say yeah, yeah I agree with what you're saying but I think to myself well let's see. I'll just appear to go along and do what management tells me! Time tells everything now. That's the way I see it. If you want to win me over you're going to have to prove yourself, not once but a hundred times, you know from a work perspective. It's made me...basically I just don't trust my management. I'm more ready to look out for myself than I am for them. I mean I'm all for working for the company and keeping it viable but...I don't have too much faith in them anymore...we tried to keep our industry viable. But I don't care about them anymore! We tried to do the right thing...and we had no support!

The concept of impression management introduces the theory of "front and backstage" (Goffman, 1984) behaviour that out-group members may display. In the frontstage, employees may display the socially acceptable version of behaviour that management require for efficient operation of the organisation. The employee will 'give the appearance that his activity in the [frontstage] maintains and embodies' organisational standards and 'give the impression that they are working hard' (Goffman, 1984:110-112). However, once an employee moves their behaviour to the "backstage region" of the organisation they may display behaviour that contradicts their initial impression of the organisation. As Goffman (1984:114) explains, it is here in the backstage region that the employee constructs 'illusions and impressions' away from where managers are 'able to see the treatment accorded them in comparison with the treatment that could have been accorded them'.

A constant change from frontstage to backstage behaviour can eventually lead an employee to "drop the façade" and begin to display inappropriate backstage behaviours in the presence of management (Taylor, 1998). In a situation where an out-group member is met by constant boundaries between themselves and management they may become disinterested in displaying the appropriate behaviour at all. This is evident in the interview with Lisa:

> Lisa: I think a lot of permanent damage was done by management because they like to go out and have drinks and things and unfortunately people overhear what they say and it's a very small area. They've been heard sledging entire departments, entire groups of staff! ...My heart's not in it anymore! I don't want to be there. I'm exhausted. I'm sick of fighting these people...I don't want to be there with [employees] who are defeated, who feel hopeless, who feel unlistened too and unvalued. Because being around those people all the time eats away at you, you have to be really watchful that you don't become like that yourself! I no longer care what they think of me or whether they see me as doing my job or not!

An employees' management of emotion and frustration from being part of the out-group cannot contribute positively to employment relations. The statement made by Lisa indicates that she is no longer prepared to work towards fostering harmonious relationships with management in the workplace due to negative

experiences in the past. Under such circumstances, it would be wise to assume that management need to be aware of the use of front and back stage behaviour and impression management by employees as such activity in the workplace could have long-term detrimental effects on both employment relations and the successful operation of organisation.

CONCLUSION

This paper gives a very brief example of the implications that inter-group boundaries can have on employment relations. It can be assumed that differences between management and employee groups will always exist in the workplace. However, the emphasis on employment relations needs to be on fostering positive development of employee-management relationships, rather than developing and maintaining boundaries between the two groups. In a situation where new management groups are introduced into an organisation, encouragement of positive employment relations should be considered a priority. Employees may experience discomfort and uncertainty with large-scale organisational change. However, this can be overcome through recognition and use of employee knowledge, as well as adequate communication and consultation. Groups are a natural product of organisational structure and will always attract members for task related and socio-emotional reasons (Anderson, 1975). While some inter-group differences are necessary for groups to exist in an organisational context, constant emphasis on differences between management and employees in the Latrobe Region has led to negative employment relations. In the current environment organisations operate in, one could assume that fostering positive employment relations between groups is one of the most important steps that should be taken to increase organisational efficiency.

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