Quality Circles Using Small Group Formation

By FRANK SHIPPER

Organizations can use quality circles (QCs) to capitalize on a natural social phenomenon—small group formation. Mankind's prehistoric existence depended on small groups—the family and the tribal group—for survival. Today, informal small groups exist in organizations to improve the quality of work life. Whether the efforts of these groups are desirable to management is the question.

Importance of the work group

How important is the work group? In an adult's life, it often becomes the primary reference group. If adults are asked to describe themselves, they most commonly talk about their work. In a social setting, the most frequently asked question after "What's your name?" is "What do you do?" Consider for a moment that working adults spend more waking hours interacting with their work group than with any other group, including their family. Some social scientists now argue that the organization has replaced the extended family.

One strong indication of the work group's significance is that the lack of membership in one appears to be a contributing factor to mental illness. There is a higher incident of mental problems, such as depression and withdrawal, among people who have been laid off or fired. Retirement causes a serious adjustment in life patterns.

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Group behavior

When group behavior is recognized as a contributing factor to most on-the-job behavior, and when the work environment is designed to promote constructive and meaningful group behavior, both the individuals and the organization profit.

For years, the major Japanese companies have taken advantage of the idea of the company as an extended family. When Japanese workers join an organization, they are wedded for a lifetime. That wedding is more permanent than most marriages in the U.S. The Japanese company provides subsidized company housing, offers merchandise at discount, arranges weddings, rents the bride a wig and kimono for the wedding, sponsors judo clubs, volley ball teams and flower arranging classes and offers cut-rate vacations at posh retreats. This macro-approach to creating an extended family has been a major contributing factor to the stability and development of Japan's work force. Some American companies, such as Texas Instruments and IBM, have developed similar styles, although they are not as far-reaching.

A micro-approach to group behavior has emerged in the form of autonomous work groups. Volvo, for example, has arranged much of its work force into teams. The teams are provided with private lounges in which they can meet, have lunch or take a coffee break. The assembly line has been replaced with motorized carriers, and work frequently can be done in areas where the workers can socialize as they work. The workers can divide among team members the tasks to be performed. Thus, employees can rotate and learn a variety of jobs, to break the monotony of the assembly line.

Group dynamics can be a positive or a negative force for the organization. The more an organization plans for the incorporation of group dynamics in its design of the work environment, the higher the probability that positive forces will come from the group process.

Group strength

Over a long period, informal group pressure will win the power struggle with the formal organization. The history of the rise of unions, from small enclaves of dissatisfied workers to an organized political force, is the history of struggle between group processes and organizational power, as were most of the counterculture movements of the 1960s and such conservative movements as California's Proposition 13.

Groups, over time, develop norms that become unwritten rules enforced primarily through reinforcement. This reinforcement can be as simple as group members nodding their heads in approval to other group members. In this way, the expressed behavior and attitudes are being reinforced.

The group also uses punishment to enforce its norms. Stories of a rate buster on the assembly line being physically abused or the office worker who is extremely productive being verbally abused are well known. Although punishment is an enforcer used by management as

well, groups are often more sophisticated than management in using Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory to enforce compliance with the norms.

Groups traditionally have used ostracism as a form of behavior modification. It is the same form of reinforcement parents use when they ignore a child's temper tantrum. American Indian tribes used ostracism by expelling a tribal member who had committed an affront to the gods. At the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Cadet Honor Committee uses ostracism to enforce its rules. In work groups, ostracism can be found, for example, in refusals to go to lunch with someone or failure to invite an individual to join the shop's bowling team. Ostracism is frequently referred to as "the cold shoulder."

As soon as an individual stops breaking the group norms, he or she is usually readmitted to the group. Thus, the individual is reinforced for conforming to the norms. Over a period of years, the subtle reinforcement of head nods and verbal agreement creates an extremely cohesive work group. It is little wonder that after many years all executives in an organization begin to dress alike and even look alike. The danger in any group is when the group members begin to think alike. Creativity in this type of group can be very low, unless creativity is a norm and reinforced by the group.

When an outsider joins a well-defined and long-term organizational environment such as the civil service or the military, he or she can suffer cultural shock. Stable group norms have evolved over time that result in rather stringent enforcement of previously established acceptable group behavior. In addition, these organizations have relatively long-term employment among the leadership at all levels of management.

Formal rules

In contrast to informal groups, organizations resort to written

rules to establish acceptable behavior. Several problems surrounding organizational rules, however, generally make them less effective than work group norms.

First, the rules can be likened to a maze through which the laboratory rat is run. The rules in large bureaucracies can become so complex that no one can perform a job without breaking the rules. The controllers at airports exemplify this situation. When the controllers want to create a work slowdown, all they do is follow the rules to the letter.

Second, the breaking of petty rules creates general disrespect for all rules. For example, the average speed on the highways is estimated to be more than 62 miles per hour, despite the speed limit of 55. When someone is given a ticket for driving as fast

as 65 miles per hour, he or she feels singled out in an arbitrary and capricious manner. In this case, a generalization is made: This isn't fair, thus all speed limits are unfair. Of course, this example is somewhat overstated. But the generalization created by such situations extends far beyond traffic control.

Beyond the disrespect for rules stemming from generalizations, a third problem occurs in rulemaking. The rules that state what one is allowed to do often describe only the activities in which one is supposed to engage and not the goals to be accomplished. Job or position descriptions frequently suffer from this fault. Such "rules" violate the managerial axiom of telling a person what is wanted, but not how to do it, and often lead to the unproductive results of the "it's-not-my-job" attitude.

Fourth, reinforcement of the group norms occurs more frequently and more immediately than reinforcement for organization rules, making them stronger. For instance, the rate buster may be reinforced by the group on an hourly or a daily basis, through either ostracism or physical abuse. Organizational reinforcement, on the other hand, will most likely occur through pay treatment on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis. In white collar environments, reinforcement may occur only in semi-annual or annual appraisals, or never.

Thus, if an organization is to be effective, it needs to work through these group norms to incorporate organizational rules, regulations, policy and guidance. The key is for work groups to embrace organizational goals as their norms. A successful example is the U.S. Marine Corps, in which the welfare of the Corps is recognized as more important than the welfare of any individual. The Corps capitalizes on the strength of the group process by building on, rather than fighting, the natural structures of small groups.

The structure of groups

Groups, whether formal or informal, will develop a structure. Informal group structures frequently change as leadership roles, member participation and degree of cohesion change. The perceived needs of the individuals forming the group trigger that change. If the group does not provide a means for satisfying the needs of its individual members, the group will become unstable, split or disband.

Each group develops leadership that fulfills both social and task roles. In quality circles, the leader initially fulfills the task role and the facilitator the social role. A good facilitator will train and assist the leader in developing the social role as well. In a well developed group, the leadership roles can be shared and rotated naturally.

A group can be divided into inner and outer group members. The inner group members are those who actively support the leadership initiatives and activities and who display a high degree of enthusiasm. The outer group members are those individuals who will participate when asked, follow directions when given and, in general, go along with the group. Because membership in QCs is voluntary, the inner group membership is usually the larger of the two.

Group cohesion also contributes to the structure and effectiveness of quality circles. Negative external forces tend to drive a work group together (see Figure 1.) For example, a lack of materials almost invariably leads the work group into a gripe session. Long-endured pressures, such as frustrating work procedures, can force groups to form that will oppose the goals of the organization. QCs provide workers with ways to relieve these pressures. Positive external forces, such as friendships and family, tend to limit the time and effort one is willing to expend on a work group. Unless a QC becomes effective in relieving the negative external pressures, the circle will quickly dissolve.
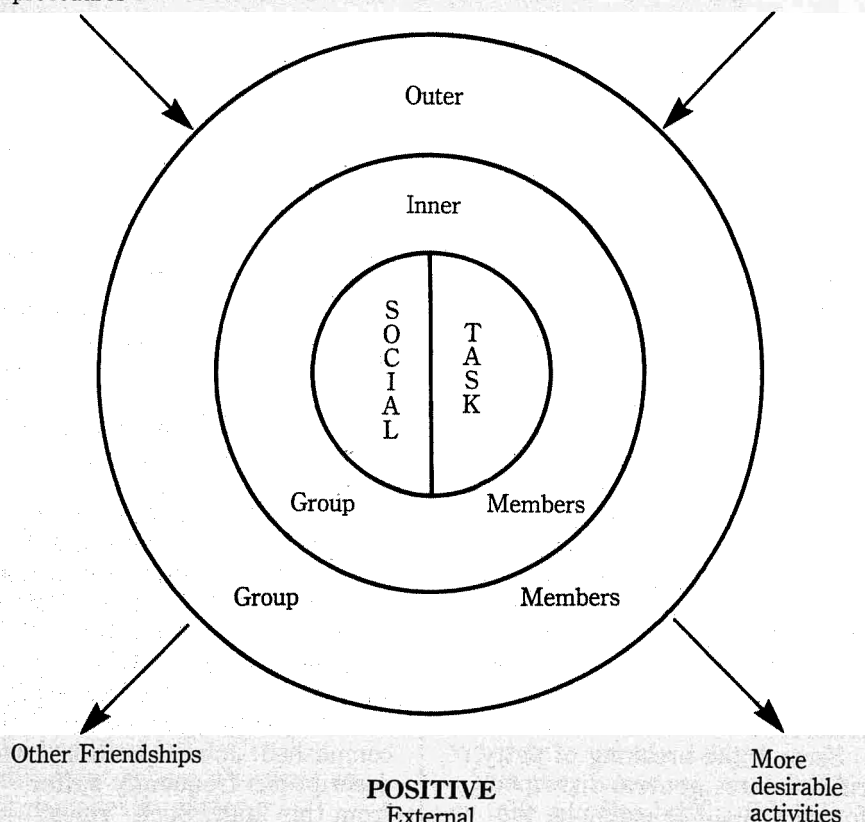
Outer-directed pressure, such as orders issued by the leadership to the inner group members

Figure 1.
NEGATIVE
External forces tend to drive a work group together

Frustrating work procedures

Lack of materials

Outer

Inner

S O C I A L

T A S K

Group

Members

Group

Members

Other Friendships

More desirable activities

POSITIVE
External forces tend to pull a work group apart

to pass on to the outer group members, will tend to push the group apart. However, if the outer and inner group members see these orders as responsive to their needs, desires and requests, the individuals tend to become more group oriented. An enduring QC structure results through sound group development.

Development of the small group

Groups develop through the restoration of various internal problems. The first problem is adaptation to outside forces. In the early stages of group development, groups can easily be dissolved by external forces. That is why in the formative stages of quality circles, regular meetings of the circle are imperative. Immediate crises can destroy the newly formed quality circles simply by absorbing their meeting times. To ensure productive meetings, the newly formed group should complete the orientation step of development.

The first phase of orientation is called isolation—setting a time and place apart for the meeting to be held. Volvo believes that this step is so important that it dedicates a separate meeting room for each group. For quality circles, the time issue is resolved by meeting one hour per week on a regular basis. In the isolation phase, it is determined if a new group serves a function and meets the needs of the individuals in either a different or a more effective manner than offered by other groups. Quality circles provide a vehicle for upward communication and thus serve a vital function for organizations. Further, they meet the needs of the individual members by providing a means for them to relieve the workplace problems that cause them frustration.

The next phase of the orientation step is socialization: members get to know each other on a personal basis. Because members of quality circles perform similar work, they frequently already know each other. The

brainstorming process is particularly good for socialization of the group, since everyone is provided an opportunity to participate. The folk wisdom that familiarity breeds confidence appears to hold for small groups.

While orientation deals with the problem of outside forces, a second concern needs to be addressed: instrumental control of the various internal group processes. If any group is to be effective, a degree of control must be obtained to prevent chaos. Social norms, such as everyone not talking at once, provide some of the control. Other processes such as leadership, decision making, communication, conflict resolution and assigning of tasks have to be executed within the group. In quality circles, the structure of the group and its various techniques assist in solving certain internal control issues. The facilitator and leader provide both the leadership roles and processes for the group.

Conflict resolution within the group is handled in a number of ways. The brainstorming process, with its ranking and selection process, prevents conflict over selection of a problem to be solved. Data collection procedures ensure the conflict that does occur will be based on fact and figures and not on opinions and emotions. The first is much less anxiety producing than the latter. When disagreements do occur, skilled leaders can often suggest additional data collection procedures to resolve the issue.

Conflict external to the group is often resolved through the entire process. The group presents its problems to management with data-based analysis and solution. The acceptance of these solutions by management will resolve the conflict. When management cannot accept the solution, it is extremely important that its reply also be supported by data and analysis. Management might suggest additional considerations, propose alternatives, conduct a trial test or suggest a compromise.

Finally, development of methods of task assignments

within the group is needed. Since the members of a QC are volunteers, part of the problem has been prevented. If the other group processes are handled well, the enthusiasm generated will permit voluntarism to continue as the major form of task assignment. Sometimes, however, volunteers cannot be found for distasteful or difficult tasks. The solution: The leader distributes the assignments evenly whenever possible. Clique formation and accusations of favoritism are the result of using criteria such as new versus old QC membership or more versus less qualified. Enthusiasm and motivation often overcome any shortages of ability due to inexperience or lack of formal qualifications.

Problem solving

In the second, or problem-solving, step of group development, the leadership, communication, decision-making, conflict resolution and task assigning processes establish the patterns for productive information exchange. Much of the success of the QC will depend on how the facilitator and leader convey and institutionalize these processes to the group as norms.

A group must resolve the problem of expressing feelings. Too frequently, people fail to express their feelings to others and let frustrations build. When those feelings finally come out, people overreact and express them in inappropriate fashions. Quite often, someone will attack another person and not the cause of the problem, exclaiming, for instance, "You stupid ***!", which is quite different from saying, "Your fuel pump assembly doesn't pump."

Thus, the first thing QC participants must learn in the expression of feelings is to avoid attacking the person; rather they should criticize the results or the intermediate behavior. Moreover, the importance of praise must be conveyed. The results achieved or the intermediate behavior exhibited should be praised rather than the person. This guideline ensures that either the behavior

or the results are reinforced and increases the likelihood that they will be repeated in the future.

Growth

Further resolution of the expression of feelings occurs through the third step in group development—productivity and growth. This third step begins when a group has not only chosen a problem, but begins actively to investigate that problem. At this point, the goal-directed activity phase emerges. When actual work begins on the problem, the group develops a focal activity. The collection and analysis of data institutes the second phase—development of feedback. Now decisions and judgments can be made on an informed basis. The knowledge and information obtained by the group through processes such as cause and effect diagrams, data analysis and management presentation provide and enhance objective feedback.

Having directed its efforts at a meaningful goal, and armed with feedback, the group enters the third phase of the productivity growth and development step— growing cohesion. Now that the group has a cause to rally around, to work for and to serve as a focal point, the members will coalesce into a semi-permanent group. As long as the group is addressing an important problem and sees the QC as the vehicle for resolving the problem, the QC will continue to exist.

Maintenance and integration

One of the turning points influencing the long-term existence of a quality circle is whether or not the proposed solution is accepted after the first management presentation. After this presentation, the group encounters a fourth problem— maintenance and integration. If the QC is successful on its first management presentation and the implementation follows fairly easily, the focal activity of the group has been removed. Unless the group has a second problem at hand to address, the QC will

begin to dissolve.

If the group is unsuccessful during its first presentation, the problem becomes even greater.

At this point, the critical importance of the other steps in group development becomes evident: How well have the first three steps in group development been carried out; and how well is evaluation and control performed by management? Evaluation, as all feedback, must be given in a non-threatening, objective manner.

As with the quality of work life philosophy, the establishment of quality circles can be mistakenly perceived as just another "feel good" program. Effective QC implementation requires intelligent group development. That development depends on successful adaptation to outside forces, instrumental control of internal group processes, an environment conducive to the open expression of feelings and ongoing maintenance and integration. While small group formation is a naturally occurring phenomenon, directing the strength of the informal group toward organizational objectives is not. QCs have been for many organizations, and can be for others, the key to the marriage of informal and formal group goals.

References

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