

Conforming Employees: A Challenge to Trainers

Results of a Study with Forest Service Employees

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Few supervisors have never been concerned about the conforming judgment of their subordinates. The director of a multi-million dollar operation once expressed his concern simply by saying that he wished he knew when his staff agreed with him because he had a good idea, and when they agreed with him because he was the boss.

This concern raises a compound question; do employees conform more with the judgment of superiors than with other employees, and if they do, what are some of the implications of conforming judgment for training directors?

A Study of Conformity

To answer these questions, this writer recently completed a study of con-

forming judgment among a group of employees to determine the degree to which the employees conformed with other employees of different status.¹ Approximately 5 per cent of the organization's employees were tested with supraordinates, peers, or subordinates and the conforming judgment of the subject under each kind of pressure was quantified.

Fifty-nine employees of the Florida Forest Service were the subjects in the study conducted in 1965-1966. The conforming judgment of the subjects was measured by a version of Asch's vertical line test. The task in this simple test is to select the one line, from among a selection of three lines, that is of the same length as a standard line. The standard line is placed approximately 40 inches to the left

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of the group of three lines. The lines vary from $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches to 11 inches in length. On this particular test there were 20 trials, 16 of which were critical.

Test Procedure

The subjects took the test twice. The first test was a silent test; the subjects made their selections and entered them on a form that they turned in at the close of the test. Later during the same day the employees returned in groups of four. However, in each group only one employee was a subject. The other three employees were confederates of the author and were all superior to, equal to, or subordinate in rank to the subject. These confederates had been briefed prior to the test to select incorrect lines on all trials except four.

During the second test the subject and the three confederates made their selections orally. The seating was arranged so that the subject was the last one to express his choice. Thus, on 16 trials the subject had to choose whether to trust his eyesight or to conform with the spurious judgment of the other three employees.

The conformity score of each subject was determined by subtracting the number of errors made on the written test from the errors made on the oral test. However, only those errors made on the written test that were consistent with the pressure induced errors made on the oral test were subtracted. For example, the subject selected line three on trials five and seven on both tests and the confederates also selected these lines in the oral test. In this instance two trials, five and seven, were subtracted from the total number of errors and the net score was the conformity score.

Conformity Scores

The conformity scores ranged from

16 to 0 under supraordinate pressure with a mean conformity score of 6.4. The range under peer pressure was from 12 to 0 with a mean conformity score of 5.2. And the range under subordinate pressure was from 6 to 0 with a mean conformity score of 1.58.

Using an analysis of variance technique the results were tested for significance and the differences between the conformity of the employees under supraordinate pressure and peer pressure, between supraordinate and subordinate pressure, and between peer pressure and subordinate pressure were significant at the .05 level. Since these differences did not appear to be due to chance it appears that there is a significant difference in the conforming judgment of Florida Forest Service employees when they are tested under differing rank pressure.

Implications of Results

The results of this study substantiates the theory that employees in a highly-structured organization conform in an upward and horizontal direction. The significant difference between the conforming judgment of employees under supraordinate pressure and peer pressure as well as subordinate pressure indicated that conformity in an upward direction is strongest.

These results suggest several important areas that need to be considered: (1) is conformity an organizational norm?; (2) what are the personal characteristics of the conforming employee?; (3) does conforming judgment threaten an organization in any way? and (4) what are the implications for the training director?

Conformity a Norm?

The first question, is conformity an organizational norm?, can be answered only by studying a specific organization. Such a study should consider the

promotion and reward system of the organization. If rewards continually go to employees who parrot the opinions of supervisors without being genotypically convinced of the merits of various procedures, there is reason to believe that conformity is a norm.

Personal Characteristics

The second question, what are the personal characteristics of the conforming employee?, is answered by the results of a study conducted in 1955 by R. S. Crutchfield.² In this study, "Conformity and Character," Crutchfield found that the conforming employee tended to be restricted to a narrow range of interest, overcontrolled his impulses, was unable to make decisions without vacillation or delay, became confused under stress, and was overly responsive of other people's evaluations. In contrast he found that the independent employee was an effective leader, was persuasive, was efficient and was self-reliant.

Danger of Conformity

The third question, does conform-

ing judgment threaten an organization in any way?, is answered in part by the implication of Crutchfield's study. A confused, vacillating employee in a hazardous occupation may delay making a decision that would save lives or property.

Similarly a delay with a business decision may result in a company loss. And conforming with the boss may deprive the leader of a second look at a faulty plan that could be corrected by some independent thinking by the subordinate.

Challenge to Trainers

The last question, what are the implications for the training director?, may be answered succinctly. He is challenged to develop his training activities to accomplish at least two major objectives: (1) to devise techniques that will reach the conforming employee and teach him to think for himself in training sessions rather than reflect the opinions of his peers or superiors; and (2) to devise a training program to help the conforming employee become self-sufficient.

References

1. Long, H. B. "Status and Conforming Judgment," *Adult Education*, in press.
2. Crutchfield, R. S. "Conformity and Character," *American Psychologist*, 1955, 10, 191-198.

Tennessee Technical Institute

A second State technical institute is now under construction at Memphis, Tennessee. This institute will offer five programs in engineering technology—civil, electrical, electronics, instrumentation, and mechanical; two programs in electronic data processing—business

and scientific; and a program in chemical technology. Also, the Chattanooga State Technical Institute will initiate a program in nuclear technology to support the AEC, Oak Ridge facilities, and other associated industries in the State. (*U. S. Office of Education.*)