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Group Dynamics

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Group dynamics are the influential actions, processes and changes that take place in groups. Much of the world's work is accomplished by people working with others in groups, and the processes that take place within these groups – the continual vying for social status, the give-and-take collaboration between members, the pressure of the group on the atypical individual, and the eruption of conflict and discord that can shatter the group – significantly shape members' experiences as well as their accomplishments. It was the eminent social scientist Kurt Lewin (1951) who used the term 'group dynamics' to describe the powerful and complex social processes that emerge in groups.

Neither leaders nor their **followers** go uninfluenced by these group processes. Although trait-level analyses of the unique personal qualities of leaders and the close connection between these traits and followers' outcomes often ignore where leadership occurs, when leadership is viewed as a social process involving leaders and their followers then the interpersonal context of leadership must be considered. Because groups are the context for these interpersonal processes, a complete analysis of leadership requires a thorough understanding of group dynamics.

The connection of group dynamics to leadership processes is a reciprocal one: the way the leader organizes, directs, coordinates, supports and motivates others in the pursuit of shared goals influences the group and its dynamics, but the leader's own actions and reactions are shaped by the group as well. Lewin *et al.* (1939) were among the first researchers to affirm this close connection between leadership and group dynamics empirically. They studied boys working in small groups on hobby projects. A young man was appointed the leader of each group, and this leader was trained to adopt one of three different styles of leadership. The autocratic leader made all the decisions for the group without consulting the boys. He gave the boys orders, criticized them and remained aloof from the group. The participatory, democratic leader explained long-term goals and steps to be taken to reach the goals and rarely gave the groups orders. The laissez-faire leader provided information on demand, but he did not offer advice, criticism or guidance spontaneously.

These different methods of leading significantly influenced the groups' dynamics. Groups with autocratic, directive leaders spent more time working than did the other groups – particularly those with the laissez-faire leader. This productivity, however, dropped precipitously when the autocratic leader left the room, whereas those groups with a participative leader worked diligently even when the leader was not present. The groups with an autocratic leader also displayed higher levels of conflict and hostility, as well as demands for attention, more destructiveness and a greater tendency to scapegoat one or more members.

The basic implications of these findings – that leadership processes substantially **influence** a wide range of group processes – forms the basis of most theories of leadership and has been reaffirmed in both applied and basic studies of laboratory and bona fide groups. Although some have questioned the impact of leaders on their followers, leaders influence the processes that occur in groups just as surely as Lewin's three kinds of leaders changed the way the groups of boys worked

together and related to each other (Forsyth 2006). Groups of individuals, when they face an emergency, often fail to respond; but if a leader is present in the group this bystander effect becomes less likely (Baumeister *et al.* 1988). Groups, when discussing solutions to problems, tend to spend too much time discussing information shared by many members – unless a leader is present in the group who controls the group's tendency to focus on shared information (Larson *et al.* 1996). Groups seeking creative solutions to problems tend to perform less effectively than individuals working alone, but not if a leader is present in the group who pushes the group to reach higher standards of performance (Offner *et al.* 1996). Groups get more done when a leader is present, due to reductions in social loafing and increased member–member coordination (Karau and Williams 1993).

But the direction of influence goes both ways. Just as leaders shape group processes, so many core group-level processes significantly influence leadership. Fiedler's (1978) contingency theory, for example, assumes that the favourability of the leadership situation is determined by the type of task the group faces and leaders' position **power**, but it is the group's acceptance of the leader's influence that is the key factor determining the success of a leader who focuses primarily on the task compared with one focusing primarily on relationships. Not only are situations that differ in favourability more propitious for one style of leadership than another, but in many cases skilled leaders will change their basic style of leadership depending on the group situation (Hersey and Blanchard 1982). Leaders may also change their approaches to leading unintentionally, as they respond to the subtle pressures of the group's dynamics. Janis's (1982) theory of groupthink, for example, describes the close association between group processes and leadership in disrupting the flow of information within groups seeking solutions in highly stressful situations. Groupthink occurs when a group becomes highly cohesive, and as a result fails to provide the leader with accurate feedback about his or her initiatives. Leaders, when working in such supportive, closeknit groups, often respond by becoming even more directive and closed to input, with the result that the group makes critical errors that are not corrected through dissent and deliberation.

Conceptualizations of leadership emergence also note that who becomes the leader of a group depends both on the qualities of the leader and the status-confirming processes of the group. For example, Berger and Zelditch (1998), in their work on status differentiation, confirmed that leaders emerge in groups through a status-organizing process as members accept influence from some members but refuse to

be influenced by others. The emergence process is also influenced by leaders' ability to build coalitions among followers, but their failure often results when a revolutionary coalition of members forms that demands change within the group (Lawler 1975). Studies of social **identity** suggest that the tendency to identify with a group and to take on the qualities of that group as one's own also determine who will be accepted as the leader of that group: the individual who best matches the shared prototype of the group will likely lead it (Fielding and Hogg 1997).

In sum, groups are dynamic: powerful rather than weak, active rather than passive, fluid rather than static, and catalysing rather than reifying. Because leadership, in most cases, occurs in a group context, these dynamic processes determine how leaders lead groups and organizations, but these processes are themselves influenced by leaders. In consequence, leadership and group dynamics combine to determine a wide range of interpersonal outcomes.

See also: **behavioural theories of leadership, contingency theories, identity, leader–follower relations, trait theory**

Further reading: Avolio *et al.* 2003; Chemers 2000; Forsyth 2006; Hackman and Wageman 2005; Hogan and Kaiser 2005