An Assessment of the effects of informal groups on employee performance: A case of High Schools in Bulawayo Province. (2012-2013)

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Abstract: *The study sought to investigate the effects of workplace informal groups on employee performance in Bulawayo Province. In schools, the level of students' academic performance has gone down, prompting the researchers to carry out the study. This is evidenced by the overall Bulawayo percentage pass rate at all of its thirty nine schools which fell from the 2012 high of 86% to 80.35%. (Zimbabwe Focus 17.02.14). The main objective of the study is to ascertain the effects of informal groupings on employee performance. A Descriptive survey design was used while a questionnaire and semi-structured face to face interview guides were conducted to collect the data. The researchers used stratified random sampling technique to select respondents and the sample size was 50 teachers and 39 head principles from 39 schools. The research findings were analysed using tables and graphs and the findings indicated that workplace informal groups significantly contribute towards students' academic employee performance. The researchers recommended that school heads should foster good team spirit and positive relationships by turning informal groups into active organisation's participatory groups whose main objective would be to help every member to improve students' academic performance which enhances positive relationship amongst the employees. The study recommends that school management should identify themselves with the group's informal leaders to gain corporation of the group.*

I. Background to the Study

In today's organisation, where productivity and efficiency demand collaboration within and across functional, physical and hierarchical boundaries, collaboration in employee networks has become critical to innovation, and to both individual and company performance. This does not apply to companies only but also to institutions such as schools. Executives in the Ministry of Education and Culture have invested millions of dollars on new institutional designs, cultural initiatives and technologies to promote the sharing of knowledge and expertise for improved performance, yet these efforts have achieved disappointing results. According to Parker and Cross (2004), most managers have little understanding of how their employees actually interact to get work done. In fact, institutional charts fail to reveal the often hidden social networks that truly drive or hinder an individual's performance. Most heads of schools spend little attention to support and assess linkages among employees (teachers). Educational Institutions exist in order to promote literacy nationwide and to remain result oriented. Parker and Cross (2004) observe that in achieving institutional mission and objectives, informal groups emerge within the institute which might not be organised around a set of objectives .Mullins (2010) articulates that informal groups are very powerful social net works which are constructed in response to and through actions of their members. Mullins (2010) further articulates that managers and supervisors frequently face problems due to failure to recognise that within every organisation there are often informal group pressures that influence and regulate individual behaviour. Informal groups formulate an implicit code of ethics or undesirable set of standards establishing acceptable behaviours for a group of employees, (Mullins 2010).

According to Greenberg (2010), Informal groups can exist in an organisation as a result of the mutually shared interest of the individuals. The concept of informal groups in the Educational sector plays a vital role due to the nature of jobs and the working environment which needs commitment by the employees so as to keep standards. Most leaders have failed to appreciate the existence of informal groups and this calls for the leaders to investigate the reasons for their existence. Therefore, in light of the problems highlighted above, this study sought to investigate the effects of informal groups on employee performance. The study intends to contribute to the knowledge gap by examining the relationship between informal groups and employee performance.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Informal groups exist in every organisation characterised by people as this is the interlocking structure that governs and influences how people interact at the work place to get the goals and the objectives of the organisation accomplished. This research is therefore investigating the effects of informal groups on employee performance.

1.3 Research Questions
1.3.1 What are the effects of informal groups on employee performance?
1.3.2 How can educational institutions effectively deal with informal groups?

Sub questions
1.3.3 How do informal groups develop in educational institutions?
1.3.4 What are the characteristics on informal groups?
1.3.5 Why do employees engage in informal groups?
1.3.6 What can be done to ensure that informal groups contribute positively to the educational institutions?

1.4 Primary purpose of the study
The study sought to examine how informal groups affect employee performance.

1.5 Conceptual framework (Literature Review)
The study examined the literature related to informal groups and employee performance. It explains the existence of informal groups, their characteristics and various ways management can manage them.

1.5.1 Development and nature of Informal groups
According to Helliegel and Slocam (2007), an informal group is a type of social network that emerges without any guidance from the organisation and develops out of their daily activities, interactions and sentiments that the workers have for each other. What necessitates a group is a:

- Need for friendship
- Need for security and protection
- Need to get advise
- Need to get support
- Need to communicate

Mullins (2010) articulates that informal groups are self created and evolve out of the formal organisation. According to Jonhson and Scholes, (2004), informal groups consist of employees from different departments, irrespective of their positions with common interest. Lewin (1997) articulates that most informal groups are controlled through a leader and these groups have the capability of either supporting or opposing organisational objectives. Greenberg and Baron, (2003) argue that informal groups can not be established nor be destroyed by the organisation but have a strong influence on the organisation. Organisations have considerable influence on the development of informal groups through organisational atmospherics the leadership practices and technology used.

1.5.2 Types of Informal Groups
According to Handy (1993), they are six types of informal groups and these are:

- Interest groups who come together for the purpose of achieving some common objective.
- Friendship groups who come together on the basis of social interaction outside the working environment, and these are generally persons of similar age with similar views and similar interests.
- Membership groups who are part of a big group to which they belong to but they have a minimal relationship, for example, a group belonging to a religious organisation.
- Reference groups where a member allows himself to be influenced by its member's behaviour.
- Primary groups which are characterised by intimate face to face association and cooperation, for example, a family
- Secondary groups are those where the interrelationships are more general and remote. The membership of such groups is generally voluntary and easily withdrawn.

1.5.3 Characteristics of Informal Groups
According to Handy (1993), the following are characteristics of informal groups:

- Grapevine which is known as informal communication.
- Lack of official information
- Quick passing of information throughout the organisation and in some cases, spreading of rumours (which is incorrect information that is not supported by substantial evidence
- The procedures of informal communication are easily changed to meet the communication needs of the group and this is cut through the organisational structure ignoring the formal channels of communication.

- Informal group objectives are not formally laid out (Burt, 1992)
- Informal groups are composed of employees from different departments and backgrounds
- The informal leader emerges as the individual who possesses qualities that the other members perceive as critical to the satisfaction of their specific needs for that particular time and as the needs change, so does the leader (Spataro, 2004).
- If informal leader fails to meet the group's expectations, he/she is disposed or replaced by another leader and thus the informal group's judgement of its leader tends to be quicker

1.5.4 Functions and goals of informal groups
The group whether formal or informal, basically perform the following functions and goals:
- Affiliative needs are met through the groups including needs for friendship, support and love and to share stress.
- It is a means of developing, enhancing , conflicting or a sense of identity and maintaining self esteem.
- It is means of establishing and testing reality.
- It is a means of increasing security and a sense of power of coping with a common and powerful enemy or threat.
- It is a means of getting some job done that members need to have done
- It is a means of sharing their knowledge and ideas (Sorge & Warner, 1997;Baumeister, 2003; Handy, 1993; Conway, 2002)

1.5.5 The effects of informal groups on employee performance
Positive Effects
According to Griffin (2002), informal groups help in the following:
- Development of a more effective total system
- Formal plans and policies may not meet every problem in a dynamic situation because they are pre-established and partly inflexible, hence the flexibility of informal groups helps meet the requirements
- Informal groups improve communication in a means for people to keep in touch, to learn about their work and understand what is happening in their environment.
- Informal communication channels allow more rapid and flexible interactions, responses and prevent surprises on the workforce which may be detrimental to their performance, (Barnad 1991).
- Informal groups help in organisational knowledge sharing, (Deakin, 2006; Harrington, 1991)

Negative effects
According to Sorge and Warner, (1997), informal groups can exercise undesirable power over individual members and argue that:
- They might be able to manipulate rewards and punishments and put pressure on its members to conform to its standard of behaviour
- A group might restrict the ways by which social needs can be satisfied on the job
- Informal groups lack framework for management
- While informality and flexibility sometimes advantageous, are the same traits which may make it difficult to manage an enterprise on a day to day level
- Informal groups create confusion and inefficiency within the organisation.

According to Hellriegel and Slocam,(2007), some managers view informal groups as a potential source of anti-establishment power, as a way of holding back information when the group does not agree with organisational goals or as a means of pressurising individuals to slow down production. Spataro, (2004) however observes that the belief that high productivity will work against the interest of workers is kept alive and enforced by some informal groups within the organisation. Furthermore, Spataro, (2004) articulates that groups set production limits for its members fearing that management might use an outstanding worker as a standard for output and that increased productivity might lead to some workers being laid off. Greenberg and Baron ,(2003) also point out that informal groups develop undesirable rumour in organisations and with rumours, people's reputations, careers and morale can be destroyed. Conway, 2002 observes that informal groups can reticulate certain members or give them the silent treatment for not conforming to group standards of acceptable behaviour and this treatment may threaten an individual's social, safety and esteem needs. Furthermore, Conway (2002), argues that what is good for the informal group is not necessarily good for the organisation, for example, doubling the number of coffee breaks and the length of the lunch period may be desirable for the group members but costly and unprofitable for the firm. Bennet (1991) argues that informal groups can cause problems on performance because the aims of the group may not correspond to the objectives of its management.

1.5.6 Management of informal groups in an organisation

According to Rees (1991), informal group dynamics can be managed so that team efforts can be directed towards organisational productivity. Managers can only minimise informal groups but will never eliminate them. Hellriegel and Slocam (2007) argue that managers should first know why the group exists and diagnose group process so as to deal with conflicts within informal groups. Donald (1960) articulates that informal groups can lead to resistance to any changes in a formal organisation and this may damage the end results. According to Donald, (1960), in order to handle informal groups, there is need to understand employee's position in the group social structure, Hofstede (1980) suggests that organisations can absorb informal leaders into the decision making structure, in order to avert threats to the stability of the formal organisation and this reduces problems related to poor performance. Morgan (1997) points out that managers should make informal groups know how the organisational functions are defined and the implications of employee behaviour as well as monitoring conformance to these expectations as this helps to improve the performance of employees.

II.   Methodology

A descriptive survey design was used to describe the effects of informal groups on employee performance. Structured interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data.

2.1. Population and sample

The population of interest of this study comprises 50 teachers and all heads who constitute schools in the Bulawayo Province. The questionnaire required the respondents to give their views, attitudes and effects of informal groups on employee performance in their respective secondary schools. They also compared the relationship between management of informal groups and the performance of their school organisations and come up with recommendations for improving employee performance in their respective secondary schools.

2.2 Findings
2.2.1. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by sex.

Sex	Frequency	% Frequency
Male	28	72%
Female	11	28%
Total	39	100%

Males heading the secondary schools constitute 72% of the sample whereas females constitute 28% as shown in the table above. A sample of 50 teachers was also selected and males constituted 48% while women constituted 52% of the total sample selected.

2.2.2. Table 2 shows the response rate

Questionnaires sent to the head principals	39
Questionnaires received	39
Response rate	100%

39 questionnaires were distributed to all 39 secondary schools heads and the response rate was 100% as shown in table 2.

2.2.3. Types of informal groups

Our study sought to identify the most popular types of informal groups among the selected schools. We found that 92% of the respondents indicated that interest groups are common in most schools while 8% are friendship groups.

2.2.3 Reasons why employees engage in informal groups

Our study sought to identify the most popular reasons for engaging into informal groups among the selected secondary school teachers.

Table 3 Frequency of the reasons for engaging into informal groups

Reason	Frequency	Frequency in Percentage
To meet and socialise with friends	24	61%
To discuss work place grievances	20	23%
To share knowledge, identity & self esteem	3	8%
Other reasons	3	8%
Total	50	100%

Table 3 presents a summary of our findings. We found that the most common reason for belonging to informal groups is to socialise with friends and this constitutes 61% of the respondents. 23% of the respondents indicated the reason to discuss workplace grievances. 8% pointed out that they form informal groups in order to share knowledge, for identity and self esteem, while the other 8% highlighted other reasons such as just to follow others.

2.2.4 Characteristics of informal groups
Our study came out with different perceptions by the heads of selected secondary schools as features of informal groups. Figure 1 shows the response rates of the perceived features.
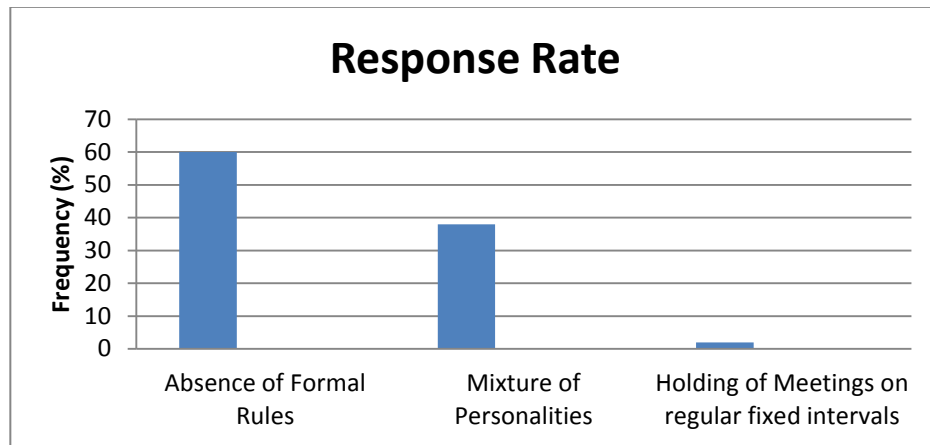
60% of the respondents indicated that absence of formal rules and procedures is the key characteristic of informal groups, 38% argue that informal groups can be identified by composition which is a mixture of personalities, while 2% perceived that informal groups can be identified through holding meetings on regular mixed intervals.

2.2.5 Effects of informal groups on employee performance
Having inquired about the reasons why employees engage on informal groups in schools, we went on to determine the effects on informal groups on employee performance.
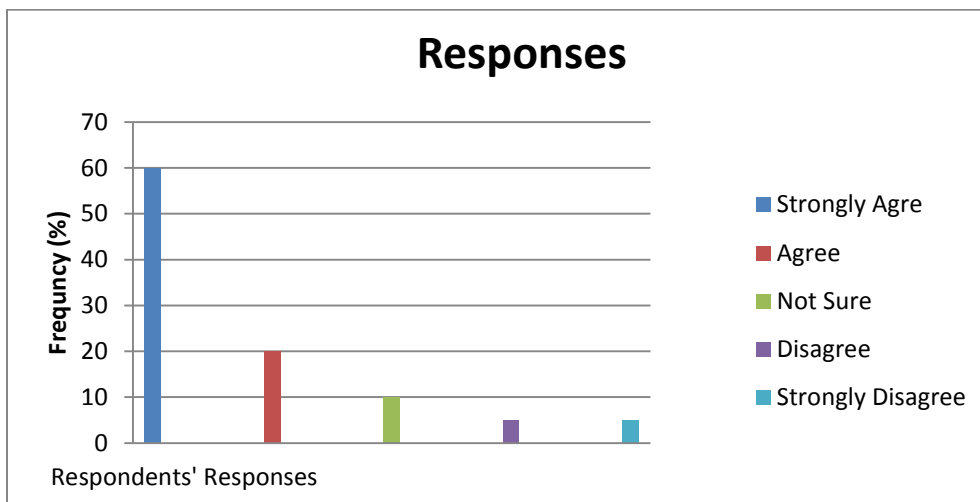

Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of school heads who agree that overall school performance is heavily affected by informal groups. 60% of the respondents strongly agree, 20% agree, 5% disagree while the other 5% strongly disagree that informal groups affect the level of employee performance.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that 60% of the respondents indicated that informal groups negatively affect employee performance, while 35% indicated that informal groups positively affect performance and 5% indicated that informal groups have both negative and positive effects on employee performance.

Figure 3 shows results on the effects of informal groups on employee performance.

Response Rate
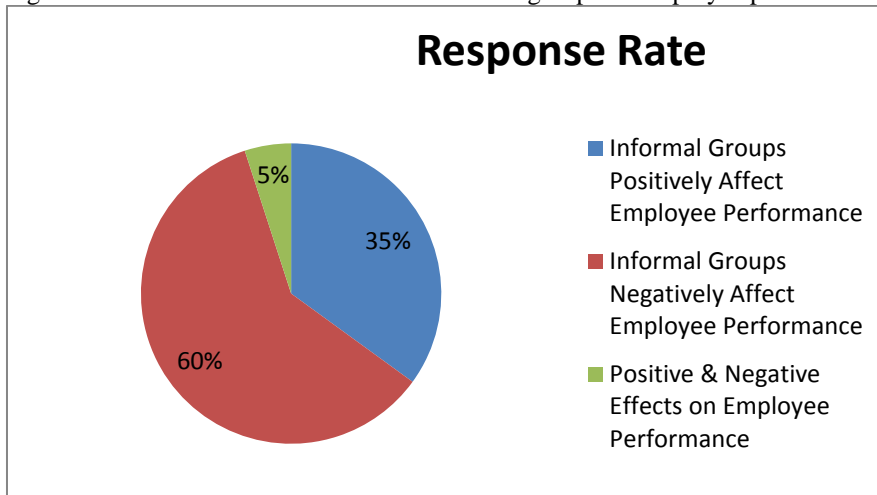
2.2.6 **Discussion of work related ideas in informal groups**

Figure 4 shows the frequency of discussing work related issues in informal groups.

Responses
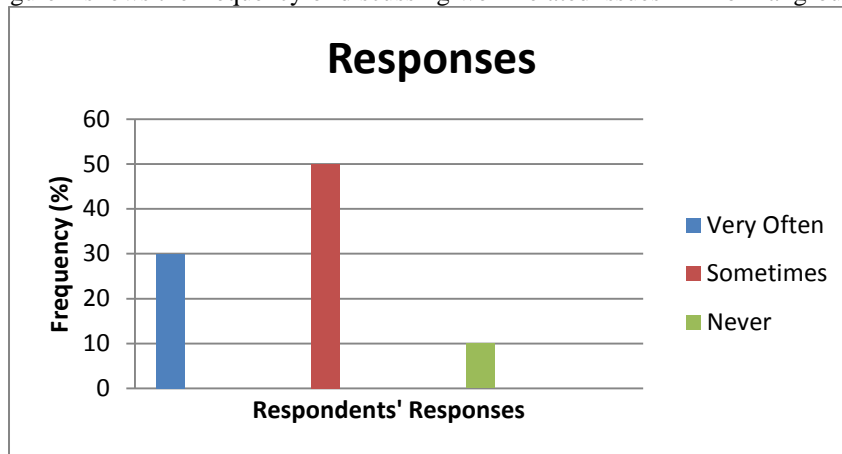
When respondents were asked how often they discuss ideas related to their jobs during informal group interaction, 30% indicated that they discuss very often, 50% sometimes discuss work related issues while 10% indicated that they have never discussed work related issues during their informal group interaction.

2.2.7 How school head principals can manage informal groups in order to improve on employee performance.

Responses
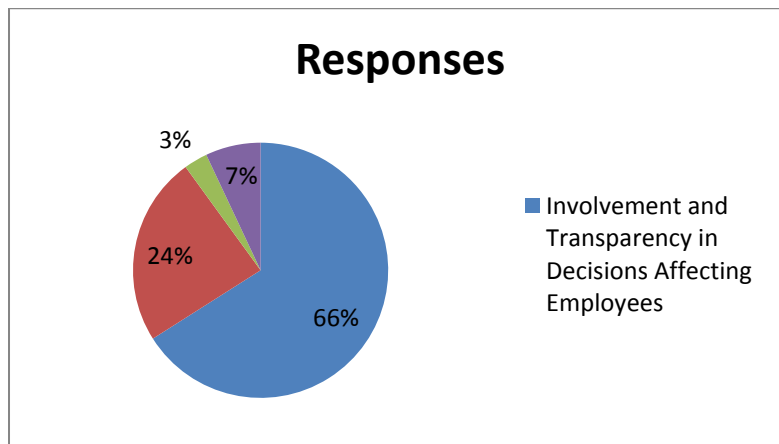
Our study sought to find out school heads' perceptions on ways of dealing with or managing informal groups and the findings show that school heads have different views on how the schools can mange informal groups. 7% of the respondents did not respond to the question. This may be due to lack of knowledge or ideas about the question or fear that their responses might turn out to be to their disadvantage if applied to them by management. The majority of the respondents that constitute to 66% however feel that the best way in which informal groups can be dealt with is involvement and transparency in decisions that affect teachers. 24% of the respondents feel that the best way of dealing with informal groups is through developing good professional relationships with informal leaders while the minority of the respondents (3%) believe in elimination or discouragement of informal groups.

III.   Conclusions

If the school heads were to view informal groups from a positive perspective, then it would be possible to leverage these informal groups to improve student's academic performance in Bulawayo Schools. The building of such synergy and cohesion among school members requires ability to diagnose and manage the informal groups in their nascent stages before they blow out of proportion and hinder students' academic performance. School heads ought to be encouraged to be alert and sensitive to informal group formation and be well prepared to work together with the informal leader in order to achieve positive results. When schools open communication channels and appropriate leadership training provided, informal groups can be contained and prevented from degenerating into unmanageable informal groups that hinder students' academic performance.

IV.   Recommendations

It is recommended that in order to enhance students' academic performance, school heads should implement the following:

* Ensure that there is proper communication within the school
* Encourage participative discussions
* Eliminate mistrust
* Encourage transparency
* School heads should identify themselves with the group's informal leader to gain the cooperation of the group because if one can move the informal leader, it means that person is able to move the entire group
* Teachers and support staff should be obedient, for example, they must make it an organisational culture.

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