

# MANAGING INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE IN WORK GROUPS

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*This research was driven by the question, "In empowered work groups, who should be responsible for determining disciplinary actions in response to group member poor performance: the formal manager, a single group member, or the group as a whole?" Results in a study of 231 group members representing 41 groups from four diverse organizations showed that the severity of disciplinary actions made by formal managers is equivalent to actions taken by groups through consensus decision-making. Selecting one member of the group, however, to handle a poorly performing member resulted in relatively lenient disciplinary actions. Consistent with this finding, the attitude survey results revealed that individual group members are reluctant to assume responsibility for disciplining a poorly performing group member. © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

## Introduction

During the 1990s many companies changed their organizational structures from work assignments performed by individuals to those performed by work groups or teams. Companies such as AT&T, General Electric, Xerox, and General Foods found that the use of work teams improved overall organizational effectiveness (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Yeatts & Hyten, 1998). In these work teams, group members are often given both increased responsibility and an expanded role in decision-making. Often referred to as empowered work groups or teams, these groups typically make work-related decisions that in the past were made by formal managers such as establishing performance goals, allocating assignments, and coordinating work among group members. In organizations with empowered work groups, the role of formal managers has been trans-

formed from directly controlling subordinates to providing support and guidance for multiple work groups.

An important issue for organizations with empowered work groups is how to manage performance problems of members of these groups. In other words, how should disciplinary decisions be made within empowered work groups? Human resource (HR) professionals need to consider this issue, because it may be that team members are in a better position to evaluate the performance of their peers than are formal managers. Members of empowered teams typically work closely together and thus have more opportunities to observe each other's performance. Also, group evaluations of a member's poor performance may be less prone to bias than are evaluations made by the formal manager. Furthermore, team members may need to be given responsibility for critical issues such as handling performance

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problems of peers if they are to feel “empowered”. Thus, HR professionals need to consider replacing traditional disciplinary practices, where the formal manager manages a poorly performing member, with disciplinary practices that may be more compatible with empowered work groups.

There are three main approaches for handling a poorly performing member of an empowered work group: 1) One individual in the group may be elected by group members to handle such decisions; 2) All group members except the poor performer may meet and, through discussion of the problem, arrive at a consensus concerning the disciplinary action to take; 3) The formal manager, who is not a member of the group, handles the problem. Unfortunately, few studies have addressed how performance problems of members of empowered work groups should be managed. Previous research has focused on the disciplinary decisions of formal managers and the way in which groups would make such decisions has been ignored (Liden & Arad, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to examine three main approaches to handling these decisions by comparing the severity of disciplinary decisions made by individual group members, groups (through member discussion and consensus), and formal managers (external to the work group). In addition, we assessed attitudes of members of empowered work groups regarding their feelings about disciplining fellow group members.

### Research Questions

#### *Manager Versus Group and Individual Disciplinary Decisions*

Previous research on disciplinary decisions has largely focused on manager responses to poorly performing subordinates (Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981). Relatively little is known about how groups discipline poorly performing team members. For a number of reasons, it is believed that group members and groups as a whole will not respond to a poorly performing member in the same manner as managers. Specifically, attribution theory and social distance theory suggest that groups and group members will be less harsh than will managers.

Attribution theory is based on the assumption that people derive causal attributions for the behavior of other individuals (Kelley, 1967). In the context of performance management, attribution theory suggests that a manager’s actions regarding a poorly performing subordinate will be based on the causes of the poor performance. Causal attributions can be either internal or external to the poor performer. Examples of internal causes of poor performance are the individual’s lack of ability or lack of effort. On the other hand, if the individual was assigned a very difficult task, or if other situational constraints made the task difficult to complete, the manager will make external attributions for the poor performance (Green & Mitchell, 1979). A manager is likely to be more harsh in disciplining a poor performer when that person’s poor performance is based on internal causes (lack of ability or effort) than on external causes (i.e., situational constraints; Mitchell et al., 1981). Because a group member may be more aware of situational causes of a fellow group member’s poor performance, than would a manager (Cardy & Dobbins, 1994; Mumford, 1983), an individual group member may be less severe in disciplining a poorly performing group member.

Social distance theory also suggests that managers will be more severe than group members and groups. Social distance has been defined as the degree of sympathetic understanding that exists between two persons or between a person and a group (Owen, Eisner, & McFaul, 1981). Characteristics such as race, gender, and status have been shown to increase social distance. Thus, due to the higher status and authority of their positions, managers will be more socially distant to subordinates than group members are to one another (Messé, Kerr, & Sattler, 1992). This social distance makes managers more comfortable when providing negative feedback to their subordinates. On the other hand, group members, who may be closer to their fellow members than are managers, may not feel comfortable criticizing fellow group members. Thus differences in social distance suggest that managers will be more severe in their decisions concerning poor performers than would group members and groups. This study examines whether managers’ disciplinary decisions

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are more severe than groups' disciplinary decisions reached through group consensus, and whether managers' disciplinary decisions are more severe than group members' individual disciplinary decisions.

### Group Versus Individual Disciplinary Decisions

An argument can be made for group consensus disciplinary decisions, in general, to be more severe than those made by individuals. Individuals may be reluctant to advocate a severe response to poor performance of a fellow group member. When joining together, however, groups may feel more comfortable in taking a more severe response in handling the poor performance, because no one group member can be singled out as being accountable for the disciplinary decision. An individual decision involves greater accountability than a group decision. Furthermore, research has shown that individuals tend to avoid difficult, sensitive decisions when the degree of accountability increases. For example, increased accountability has been shown to cause decision makers to portray themselves in the most positive light (Fandt & Ferris, 1990; Tetlock, 1985). Just as accountable individual student decision makers avoided rejecting student loan applications (Adelberg & Batson, 1978), individual group members would be expected to be lenient in disciplinary judgments concerning a fellow group member.

Based on accountability theory, individual disciplinary decisions are expected to be relatively less severe than are group consensus decisions. When accountability is spread across all group members, no one group member is accountable for the decision, and there should be less fear of retribution. Thus, a more severe decision will be made when it is felt that the poor performer is unable to attach responsibility for the decision to a particular group member. This study, therefore, also examines whether groups' disciplinary decisions reached through group consensus are more severe than those made by individuals.

In sum, attribution theory and social distance theory suggest that managers will be more severe in disciplining poor performers than will either groups making disciplinary

decisions through group consensus or individual group members (working alone). Accountability theory suggests that groups will, in turn, be more severe in their disciplinary decisions than will the individual group member; however, the empirical evidence is quite limited on this issue. Thus, the purpose of this study is to address the following question empirically: Do work groups, individual work group members, or managers exercise more strict discipline on poor performers?

### Method

#### Overview

Discipline in work groups is a sensitive topic and has rarely been studied in a field setting. As a first step in examining this issue, we conducted a laboratory experiment in a field setting. That is, participants read eight cases that described a hypothetical group member's poor performance and the circumstances surrounding the incident. Next they indicated how they would handle the situation. They also completed an attitude survey about performance management.

#### Sample

Intact work group members and their formal managers from four organizations participated in our study: production and clerical employees at a small manufacturing company, production employees at two facilities of a large manufacturing company, managerial and administrative employees at a large distribution company, and administrative and clerical employees at a university. These organizations were located in two Midwestern states, with the exception of one facility of the large manufacturing organization, which was located in the Southeast.

Of the 49 work groups selected to participate in the study, a total of 41 work groups (231 individual members) and their managers actually participated (response rate = 84%). Demographic characteristics for the sample are provided in Table I. On average, the groups had been in existence for 20 months and averaged 5.6 members. The participants at the two facilities of the large manufacturing organi-

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**TABLE I** Sample Demographics.

Characteristic	Group Members (N=231)	Managers (N=45)
Age	35.5 years	36.8 years
Organizational Tenure	4.8 years	7.5 years
Sex	58% female	64% male
Race	69% Caucasian	73% Caucasian
Education	8%: No degree 39%: High School Diploma 9%: H.S. + Prof. Training 15%: Associate's Degree 26%: Bachelor's Degree 4%: Graduate Degree	2%: High School Diploma 20%: H.S. + Prof. Training 13%: Associate's Degree 47%: Bachelor's Degree 18%: Graduate Degree
Supervisory Experience	—	7.9 years

zation were not able to complete the individual-level portion of the experiment due to time constraints. Thus, only the first question of whether managers' disciplinary decisions would be more severe than groups' decisions reached through group consensus was addressed by the entire sample. Only part of the sample (26 groups containing 140 group members) was used to examine the remaining research questions.

#### Procedure

An experimental design and survey were used to examine our questions. All experimental materials were pre-tested with 36 undergraduate students prior to administration. Prior to the experimental portion of the study, group members completed an attitude survey concerning performance management in their work groups. Specifically, we asked individuals whether they feared that participation in a disciplinary decision of a fellow member might result in retaliation by the poor performer.

The experimental design consisted of participants responding to eight cases that each described both a hypothetical group member's poor performance and the situation surrounding the poor performance incident (for details, please refer to Liden et al., 1999). The cases depicted such performance problems as not

listening to job-relevant instructions and being late in completing an assignment. Participants were told to read each case and view the poor performer as a member of their work group. Hypothetical (as opposed to actual) cases were used for ethical reasons as well as to present the same poor performance cases to all participants. The use of eight different cases allowed us to determine the approach or policy used by decision-makers in responding to poor performance. The poor performers described in the cases had androgynous names such as Chris. The sequential order of the eight scenarios was randomized for each group. After reading each case, respondents indicated the disciplinary action they would take in response to each incident.

In order to compare disciplinary decisions of individual group members, groups, and formal managers, group members *individually* decided on the disciplinary action they would take in response to each of the eight situations or cases. Next, the same group members met—formal managers were *not* present—and discussed each scenario. Through consensus, the group decided on the disciplinary action for each case. Finally, formal managers, without knowing the group's decisions, individually decided on the disciplinary action they

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would take in response to each case. Thus, all three types of respondents (individuals, groups, and managers) determined the disciplinary action they would take in response to the same eight cases.

*Measures*

*Severity of Disciplinary Decision.* After reading each case, subjects indicated which of twelve possible actions they would take in response to the poor performance incident. Subjects were allowed to choose more than one action. Following Green and Liden (1980), we categorized the twelve actions in terms of severity, based on two dimensions: 4 levels of punitiveness and 3 levels of change in job duties. Although crossing punitiveness and job change results in 12 (4x3) categories, termination precludes the use of a job change. Thus, a 10-point scale, where 1 reflects the least severe action (no punitiveness and no job change in job duties) and 10 reflects the most severe action (termination), was used to measure the severity of the disciplinary decision.

*Attitudes about Making Disciplinary Decisions.* As part of the attitude survey, we asked individuals to respond to two statements that

we developed: “I would find it difficult emotionally and personally to take action regarding a fellow group member’s performance problem”, and “If you had to give negative feedback to a co-worker, it would be likely that he or she would hold it against you in the future”. Individuals responded to these items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

*Demographics.* The attitude survey included measures of the demographics.

*Control Variables.* We created a nominal variable to control for organization (university = 1, small manufacturing company = 2, large manufacturing company (facility #1) = 3, large manufacturing company (facility #2) = 4, and large distribution company = 5).

*Results*

In order to test the differences in severity of disciplinary decisions across managers, group members, and groups, controlling for organizational effects, a 3 X 5 two-way ANOVA (decision-maker x organization) was conducted. The results revealed a significant difference in the mean scores among decision-makers ( $F_{2,1896} = 12.49, p < .01$ ), as shown in Figure 1. In examining our first research question,

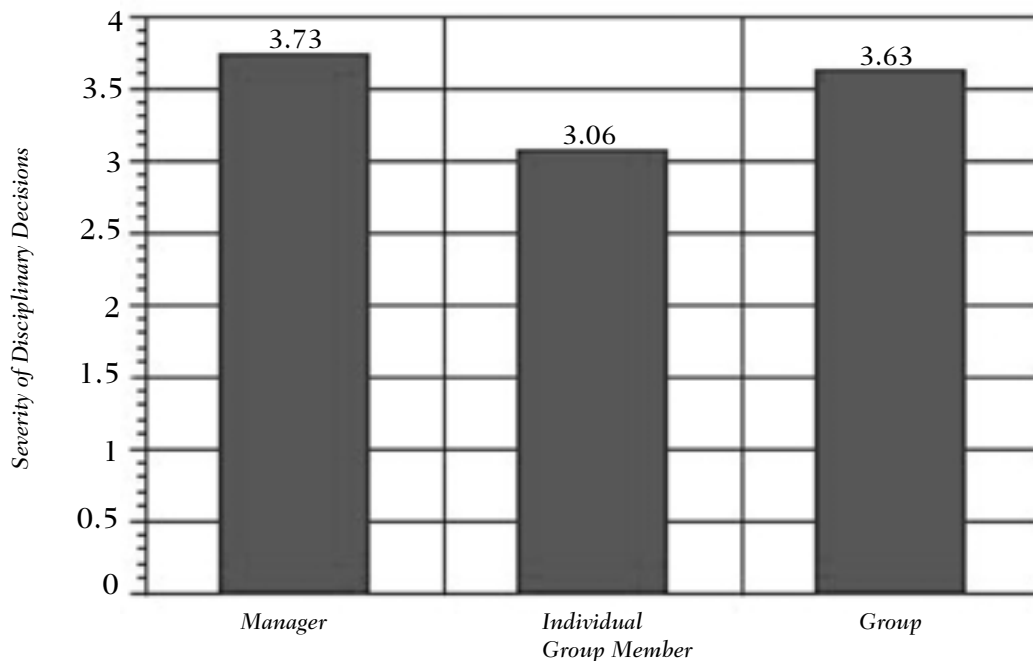


FIGURE 1. Average of severity of disciplinary decisions by decision-maker source.

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whether managers' disciplinary decisions are more severe than groups' disciplinary decisions reached through group consensus, paired t-tests revealed that managers' disciplinary decisions ( $M = 3.73$ ) were *not* more severe than those made by groups ( $M = 3.63$ ). It was discovered that following a discussion of poor performance cases, groups arrived at decisions that were comparable to those made by managers. Addressing our second research question, whether managers' disciplinary decisions are more severe than group members' individual disciplinary decisions, managers' disciplinary decisions ( $M = 3.73$ ) were found to be more severe than were group members' individual disciplinary decisions ( $M = 3.06$ ). Results for our third research question, whether groups' disciplinary decisions reached through group consensus are more severe than those made by individuals, revealed that groups' disciplinary decisions ( $M = 3.63$ ) reached through group consensus were more severe than those made by individuals ( $M = 3.06$ ).

The survey results indicated some reluctance among individual group members to being charged with the responsibility of disciplining fellow group members. In fact, over 60% of the respondents reported that they "would find it difficult emotionally and personally to take action regarding a fellow group member's performance problem". This appears to be related to the finding that over 55% of the respondents indicated that if they gave negative feedback to a co-worker, that person would hold it against them in the future.

### Discussion

A central question concerning the empowerment of work groups is just how much decision-making power should be granted. Proponents of empowerment have argued that groups should be given the responsibility of self-management, including the power to take action in response to poorly performing group members. In essence, the group would replace the formal manager in managing group performance; however, the implication of transferring such power from managers to groups has been essentially unknown. One fear among upper level management is that, relative to formal managers, groups will be overly

lenient in handling poor performance cases involving their own group members. Although not empirically documented, the assumption often made is that lenience will translate into lower subsequent group performance. Our results showing the similarity between manager and group disciplinary decisions suggest that empowerment efforts including a transfer of responsibility for disciplinary decisions from managers to work groups may *not* result in greater leniency toward poor performers.

In fact, there are reasons to believe that groups may make more accurate disciplinary judgments than do formal managers. Due to the increasing spans of control for managers that often accompany downsizing and empowerment, groups, when compared to managers, may possess much richer information on the task behaviors and performance of each group member. Group members may be in a better position to evaluate peers than are formal managers. Groups are capable of recalling more information about one another because they work together daily and because they can pool information. Also, groups may be less prone to unfair performance rating bias due to the removal of any one individual's biases by the rest of the group. Thus, our findings indicate that groups may be capable of making fair decisions regarding group member poor performance.

While group members may be capable of making these decisions, the survey results showed that just as managers tend to dislike disciplining subordinates, group members may not enjoy being empowered with this responsibility. It follows that if managers decide to delegate disciplinary decisions to work teams, advantages of that transfer of power need to be communicated to the group members.

To the extent that our findings concerning disciplinary decisions for poor performance generalize to ratings of performance, there may be implications for the use of peer ratings as well. Our results suggest that accuracy may be enhanced by having all group members, except the person being rated, reach consensus on the performance rating for the group member being rated. Group discussion of each member's performance may also serve a developmental function, as each member gains an understanding of the ingredients of suc-

cessful job performance. An additional benefit of participating in group discussion of each group member's performance is that acceptance of one's own performance rating might be enhanced, thus reducing the possibility of negative reactions to peer ratings.

Despite the comparability between managers and groups on the severity of their disciplinary actions, individual group members working alone arrived at decisions that were markedly more lenient when compared to those made by managers and groups. This suggests that granting responsibility for making disciplinary judgments to individual members of the group *may* result in excessively lenient decisions. Such lenience may subsequently lead to lower performance for the group. This is because our study specifically suggests that individual group members may feel that they can produce lower quality work and/or not complete assignments on time and not suffer disciplinary action if an individual team member is responsible for disciplining the work team members.

A limitation of this research was the use of hypothetical cases of poor performance. For ethical reasons, we did not think it appropriate for group members to discuss a current member's poor performance. In developing the cases we talked with group members about common performance problems with their peers. This enhanced the realism of the cases used in this study. A second limitation of the sample is that the groups were not responsible for making formal disciplinary decisions. A final limitation of our study is that we did not make comparisons between the disciplinary actions of formal managers versus those made by elected team leaders. Rather, we compared decisions of formal managers to individual, team members' and group consensus decisions. It would be interesting in future research to examine the severity of disciplinary decisions made by team leaders as opposed to formal managers, individual team members, and group consensus decisions. Furthermore, variability across different types of team leaders should also be studied. For example, relatively permanent team leaders who were previously the formal managers of the work group may respond differently

to a case of poor performance than would a temporary (rotated) team leader who was elected by fellow group members.

### Implications for HR

Our study shows that empowered work teams will make disciplinary decisions (through a group consensus) comparable to those of formal managers. Groups' disciplinary decisions were *not* more lenient than managers' decisions. Thus, organizations may want to consider transferring disciplinary decision-making responsibility to work teams. There are a number of advantages to having groups make disciplinary decisions. One advantage is that group members may have more information on the work behaviors and performance of each group member. Second, groups are more likely to recall information about one another because they work together daily and can pool information. Third, groups will be less influenced by any one individual's biases. As a result, it may be time for responsibility for disciplinary decisions to be transferred to empowered work teams.

There are a number of cautions associated with this recommendation. Disciplinary actions, especially termination, fall under the scrutiny of employment laws, labor management contracts, and/or organizational policies. Thus, it is important that the members of groups engaged in the handling of discipline be provided training so as to reduce the possibility of violating laws, clauses in the labor contract, or organizational policies. Through training on such issues, groups should be able to identify circumstances surrounding disciplinary judgments that signal the need to consult with the organization's labor relations or legal staff.

If groups are granted the authority to make disciplinary decisions, it is important that they be trained on effective group processes so that a group consensus decision is made when dealing with discipline problems. That is, the group needs to consider all members' viewpoints and attempt to reach a consensus decision, one that is acceptable to all members. If the group relies on one member's opinion, the decision may be biased. Another implication of transfer-

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ring disciplinary decisions to groups is that the group should also feedback negative information to the poorly performing member. Thus, groups would need training on how to give negative feedback effectively.

Our study indicates that it is *not* appropriate for one member of the group to be responsible for making disciplinary decisions. A group member who does not have more formal power or authority than other members is likely to make lenient disciplinary decisions. Furthermore, if a group is not ready to make disciplinary decisions, it is better to have disciplinary decisions made by a formal manager rather than an individual group member.

If an organization transfers responsibility for discipline from managers to the group, a critical question is whether groups need formal managers. We feel that there are a number of circumstances that indicate that formal managers are necessary. For example, when group norms are inconsistent with organizational goals, managers may need to direct the group, at least until problems within the group can be corrected. Similarly, if more than one group member is performing poorly, it may be inadvisable to place the responsibility for disciplinary action in the hands of the group. And even when the group is not suffering from excessive poor performance, the group may benefit greatly from the advice of a manager. In fact, proponents of self-managed teams have advocated that in order to achieve high effectiveness levels, managers are essential (Liden & Tewksbury, 1995; Manz & Sims, 1987). Given the complex set of interpersonal and legal issues surrounding the management of poor performance, it may be necessary to retain formal managers as advisors to work groups.

An important question pertaining to the current study is whether any of the organizations under study subsequently granted disciplinary decision making authority to work groups. In order to address this question, we attempted to gather information from our contacts in the four organizations. Major restructuring, including the depar-

ture of our contact people, precluded the gathering of follow-up data from any of the organizations under study except for the small manufacturing organization. At the small manufacturing organization we succeeded in contacting the president of the company. He told us that he and his top management group decided to continue their practice of charging managers with the responsibility for making disciplinary decisions. One of the main reasons for this was the expressed reluctance of work group members to engage in determining disciplinary actions for their fellow coworkers. The president told us that although they decided not to change the disciplinary process, they found employee participation in our study to be very beneficial. In particular, many group members commented on how they found it very difficult to make disciplinary decisions, even though the poor performance incidents to which they responded were hypothetical. Many of the research participants commented that participation in our study provided them with a new respect for what managers go through in making disciplinary decisions. The president found it very beneficial for group members to have a deeper appreciation of what managers face when dealing with poor performers.

In summary, the results of our study indicate that the severity of group consensus decisions concerning the discipline of poorly performing group members parallel decisions made by formal managers. Group handling of poor performance appears to be appropriate not only because group members often have more detailed information about the performance of all members, but also because involvement in such decisions serves a developmental function that may increase the job performance of all group members. Due to the tendency for individual group members to make more lenient disciplinary decisions than those decisions made either by formal managers or made through group consensus, we do not recommend charging an individual group member with the responsibility for handling the discipline of group members.

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