



Social sanctions and reputation in the workplace

Tristan Claridge

Social Capital Research & Training, Dunedin, New Zealand

Abstract

Your workplace has norms that govern appropriate behaviour, even if you are may not fully aware of them. All workplaces do. When humans interact social norms are developed and these norms are enforced by social sanctions. A sanction is a reaction from others to the behaviour of an individual or group. In general sanctions for conformity are positive while sanctions for nonconformity are negative. Social control depends on sanctions and they are essential for groups of people to work together effectively.

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What social sanctions are common in your workplace?

The list of possible sanctions in social interaction is huge, as is the range of their severity. Not all norms carry the same sanctions because not all norms are of equal importance in a culture.

Some examples of sanctions for nonconformity include shame, ridicule, sarcasm, criticism, disapproval, social discrimination, and exclusion, as well as more formal sanctions such as penalties and fines.

Different people and groups also tend to sanction in different ways. I personally don't tend to yell at people but I can give a look of disapproval that is decidedly icy.

Sanctions themselves tend to be normative. For example in my cricket team most minor deviations from group norms tend to be sanctioned by ridicule. I would not say we have a negative culture, just that nonconformity tends to be light heartedly ridiculed. For us this is effective for the group to promote desired behaviour.

Clearly excessive or inappropriate sanctioning can be a problem. We need to be very careful that sanctions are only used where appropriate for nonconformity, or conformity in the case of adherence to the accepted norms.

Creating and maintaining a successful culture involves *appropriate* coordination of the accepted means of social control (social sanctions) to ensure adherence to the established or desired social norms.

Why are social norms and sanctions important?

Organisations that are successful have cultures that promote productive behaviours from their members.

Behaviours can include those that are directly productive such as helping, supporting, sharing, and collaborating. Also important are behaviours that contribute to a positive social environment that indirectly improves productivity by creating a safe, open, supportive, connected culture where people feel valued, supported, empowered, and a strong sense of belonging.

Organisational culture is the underlying beliefs, assumptions, values, and ways of interacting that guide member thoughts, feelings, appearance, and behaviour. These "social norms" are necessary for social cohesion and interaction; without them, our organisations would be chaotic, unstable, unpredictable, and noncooperative.

Creating and maintaining a successful culture requires sanctioning for deviance from the established or desired social norms.

Sanctions are a very powerful force. Even informal sanctions such as a disapproving glance, ridicule, or disparaging comments can shape the way individuals and groups behave.

Types of sanctions

Sanctions can be formal or informal. Formal sanctions are imposed through formal means by an organization (or representative) upon individuals. They are normally clearly defined, and can include fines or rewards for deviation or compliance. They are often documented in policy, rules or regulations.

Informal sanctions are imposed by individuals or groups upon other individuals or groups without the use of a formal system. Scornful looks, shunning, boycotts,

Correspondence should be addressed to
Email: tristan@socialcapitalresearch.com

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and other actions are forms of informal sanctioning.

Another distinction between different types of sanctions is useful: between internal and external sanctions.

Exclusion is a powerful social sanction. Internal sanctions are consequences imposed by the individual herself, based upon compliance with social norms. So, for example, an individual might suffer from embarrassment, shame or depression as a result of noncompliance and associated exclusion from social groups.

External sanctions, on the other hand, are consequences imposed by others and include things like expulsion from a group, public humiliation, punishment by management, and arrest and imprisonment, among others.

Sanctions do not have to be activated to be effective. The threat or possibility of a sanction can influence behaviour.

Can leaders control culture with social sanctions?

As mentioned earlier a successful culture involves **appropriate coordination** of the **accepted means** of social control. This requires a careful balance of positive and negative sanctions for conformity and nonconformity respectively. These sanctions must be appropriate and accepted, meaning that they must carefully match what is normatively appropriate for the group or organisation.

For example a public flogging is a social sanction, but there would be few organisations anywhere in the world today where this would be appropriate. This is obviously an extreme example. We need to consider whether a sanction is appropriate from a normative, moral and legal perspective, as well as how the sanction will affect our organisational culture.

As discussed earlier in relation to my cricket team, ridicule can be an effective sanction. But it can also negatively affect culture by creating an environment that is less safe, open, and supportive. Therefore sanctions need to be carefully and appropriately coordinated.

The influence of leaders

Leaders have the most influence on the culture of a group or organisation because leaders have the most control of sanctioning.

But don't underestimate the role of all group members in both influencing culture and sanctioning. The actions of any group member contributes to norm setting and therefore culture. Good leaders have the most influence in these processes.

A leader's authority gives them access to formal sanctions that other group members don't have access to. In organisations the most important formal sanctions are normally:

- Formal warnings or notices
- Withholding perks, bonuses, or promotion
- Dismissal from the organisation
- Giving perks, bonuses, or promotion
- Awards and other formal acknowledgements

Typically the threat or promise of the above are extremely important since a sanction does not have to be activated to be effective in influencing behaviour.

This gives leaders greater influence than other group members (or power – a topic beyond the scope of this article). This means that all sanctions including informal sanctions from a leader have more influence. Examples could be an approving smile or a positive comment to affirm positive behaviours or a stern or disapproving look at individuals who don't conform the established or desired norms.

Leaders also have a significant role in sanctioning actions of other individuals in the group or organisation. For example if a group member were to exclude another member for nonconformity, a leader may "sanction the sanctioner" if exclusion was not an established or desired norm for dealing with the nonconformity. This may sound a bit confusing but just remember that sanctioning, like any other behaviour in a group, is normative.

The role of reputation

Reputation is a significant motivator for continued behaviour. If someone develops a reputation for behaving in a certain way they typically feel pressure to continue to act in that way.

This can be a very positive factor in encouraging desired behaviour, but can create and perpetuate undesirable behaviours.

First a negative example: On Robert's first day he expressed cynicism towards a project the group was working on. "It's not like it's going to make any difference". He was sanctioned by his manager because negativity was not a desired behaviour. "If you keep that up we'll have to call you 'Negative Ned'". The nickname stuck. Robert would often be called Ned, especially when he expressed negativity or cynicism. This label encouraged him to continue, so what appeared to be a sanction was actually reinforcing the undesirable behaviour by casting him in this role.

Labels can also have a positive role where they typecast positive behaviours. For example, one day Jane helped another member of the team and her manager sanctioned the behaviour to reinforce it as a desirable norm. Remember a sanction can be positive or negative for conformity or nonconformity. Her manager said: "You're a helpful person Jane". This label resonated with Jane and it reinforced her belief that she is a helpful person. This reputation, even if only internal, then encouraged her to continue to be helpful in future.

Expectation sets the benchmark

Leaders are responsible for setting the expectations within a group. This commonly understood for performance: if you tell a team they can assemble 10 lawnmowers in a day they will; if you tell them they can assemble 100 in a day they will.

The same is true for behaviours. For example if a leader sets a strong expectation that they will not stand for anyone degrading another person then this sets the benchmark that any form of harassment will not be tolerated.

Setting strong expectations often involves using phrases such as:

- Absolutely never ...
- Under no circumstance ...
- ... is completely inappropriate
- Will not stand for ...
- Always ...
- It is vital that ...

Leaders need to be careful to set high but achievable expectations. When expectations are not met because they are unrealistic or unachievable it can be disheartening and can have negative effects on culture. Leaders need to be careful not to set up their team for failure.

For example when I was lecturing if I had told my students they had to read 200 pages every week most students would not have even opened their books. It was unrealistic within the context of their other courses and available time. But if I said they had to read 20 pages each week then many of them would have completed the task.

I've eluded above to the problem of setting expectations too low. This can happen even from an off the cuff comment. For example a leader may say "You'll probably forget about this...". This sets the expectation that what they are saying will not be remembered. Many people make these kinds of comments that lower expectations subconsciously and this can have negative effects on culture.

Often acknowledging a problem culture or behaviour can reinforce it if there is no agenda to resolve or improve it. See this article for further discussion of the prereflective nature of culture.

Sanctions, reputation and expectations

Leaders have control over sanctions by choosing how they sanction, and by influencing how others sanction. This is of vital importance since leaders have a responsibility to create a positive culture in their group or organisation.

Leaders need to consider how they use each of the different types of sanctions, how these sanctions

typecast people, and how their sanctions set behavioural expectations.

The types of sanctions are listed below. See above for description.

- Conformity / Nonconformity
- Formal / Informal
- Internal / External

Sanctions should be appropriate, accepted, and carefully coordinated to build or construct the desired culture.

Sanctions in creation of culture Leaders also need to very carefully consider how the use of negative sanctions for nonconformity may negatively influence the group or organisational culture. Generally leaders should focus on the use of positive sanctions for conformity to the established or desired norms.

Sanctions can lead to typecasting where an individual develops a reputation (external) or identifies with a certain label (internal). This be positive where they are cast into positive behavioural roles, but negative where they are not.

Creating a positive and productive culture in an organisation can be a delicate task that requires careful thought and delicate implementation.