

The “alpha” employee: can one employee derail (or rail) your organisational culture?

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Abstract

Firstly, it should come as no surprise that some individuals exert more influence on the culture of a group than others. I am sure that all teachers, trainers and facilitators are very aware of this phenomenon since they have to manage culture to get the most from the group. I have had numerous lengthy discussions with facilitators on this very issue and they consistently confirm this. Secondly, the general consensus among people I have talked with is that the alpha employee is extremely important in the formation of group culture. And group culture, which can be referred to as group norms, is a strong influencer of individual actions. Since we want to influence our employees to act in ways that are beneficial to the organisation, organisational culture is vitally importance.

Keywords: organisational culture, normative influence, social norms, influence, leadership, management

How do we identify the alpha employee?

There is no mould for the alpha employee. They could be any age or gender, any level of education or intelligence. They may be a young popular airhead, or an older seasoned campaigner, or a young intelligent know-it-all.

Some personality traits lend themselves to alphas more than others. For example a person who has charisma, is confident, or an extravert is more likely to be an alpha. Many alphas are opinionated, outspoken, and even manipulative.

How does the alpha employee influence others?

One of the complexities of this phenomenon is that an alpha generally does not influence everyone, and does not always have influence. They may only have influence over certain people or in certain circumstances. The people they influence may be more correlated to personality types than demographics.

For this reason in some groups there are multiple alphas, each influencing some people, potentially in opposition to each other. It's not easy to predict who they will influence. We could assume that a young person would influence other young people but this is not always the case. There are also people who seem relatively immune to influence.

To further complicate the issue influence is relative, so different people will experience varying degrees of influence.

For these reasons the ideas in this article have been over 10 years in development. The concept of the alpha employee is complicated and highly context specific, but I have no doubt that it exists, and that it is extremely important to the development of group culture. As anyone who works with or manages groups of people will attest.

Examples of the alpha employee

An unmistakable example would be someone whom everyone looks to for their response to events or changes. I have seen groups where one individual is so influential that everyone literally turns to look at them before they decide what they think about a situation. Normally it is not this overt, but can be equally influential.

“I'll talk to Jane then I'll decide how I feel about it”.

Early in my career I worked in the public sector in Australia. We had a small team of 12 people, one of whom was very influential: our alpha employee. He was about 50 years old, not particularly charismatic or intelligent, but very confident and outspoken. He could be intimidating and also manipulative. He didn't have obvious influence over everyone in the group but most of us would wait for him to pass judgement before we spoke up. From my point of view he had as much influence, or perhaps even more influence, than our boss. He had some very cynical views of the public service and the influence of his views made our team considerably less effective. Ultimately, several people

left the organisation because of these negative group cultures.

Signs of who is an alpha employee

It's normally not as obvious as the examples above. It can be difficult to see who has more influence and often we can only identify them after spending time immersed in the group.

An alpha employee may be someone who typically speaks early in meetings or discussions and who often disagrees or puts forward a different perspective to what has been previously discussed. They may do this directly, or they may be more passive, but the end result of their involvement in the discussion is often a change in direction or opinion.

They are often described as opinionated, confident, assertive, or strong willed.

They may be someone who is well-liked or highly regarded, but they also could be someone who is intimidating, domineering, inflexible or manipulative.

The effects of an alpha employee

An alpha employee can effectively railroad our team or organisation. Their influence can be so strong that leaders may feel like they don't have control. They can object to initiatives and gain enough support from other employees to block change they don't want. Their influence can create negative cultures that result in unproductive behaviours from other employees.

But the effects can also be positive. An influential employee can help achieve positive organisational change and can contribute to positive cultures.

How do we effectively manage an alpha employee?

This would require an awareness that culture matters and can be influenced by management. Since you're reading this article I suspect you are already aware, but do the decision makers in your organisation agree?

There often seems to be little consideration for the thoughts and experiences of employees, especially at the lower levels of a large organisation. Employees tend to be expected to cope, make do, or figuratively toe the line. Management tends to be too preoccupied to consider how change will impact the workers and how they may react to changes.

In this type of organisation there may be little interest from senior management in managing organisation-wide culture. But that doesn't mean that individual managers can't create positive cultures in their own team by managing their alpha employees.

Organisational culture has an influence over everyone in the organisation but each department or subgroup can create their own culture.

We often see high-performing departments or teams even in large organisations that have very negative cultures. This can be attributed to either a positive alpha employee or a leader who themselves has strong influence or can elicit the support of a strong alpha to create the desired cultures.

Should an alpha employee receive special treatment?

If you supervise a very strong alpha employee it can often feel like they're the boss not you. If you give this person special treatment it can make things worse, but not doing so can be counter-productive.

Special treatment can result in the alpha employee feeling over confident, a sense of entitlement and expectations that exceed their position within the organisation.

Just because they're opinionated doesn't mean they should run the place.

Everyone wants to feel valued and included, this is the foundation of empowerment, so don't discriminate. It may be possible to involve the alpha/s under the guise of universal inclusion. I don't mean this to be deceptive or manipulative. Inclusion is good practice anyway so do it as much as possible and make sure you include the alpha/s.

I have often discussed big picture issues with alpha employees: partly so I wouldn't be surprised down the track, and partly to ensure I had their support and therefore their influence. The trick is to do this without



singling them out or making them think you are giving them special treatment.

I have done this in my university teaching roles. When I can quickly identify an alpha student I will try to talk to them separate from the class. This is a good opportunity to discuss their expectations and hopefully correct any preconceived ideas that may negatively influence the learning cultures of the group. This way I can be confident that they will support my expectations of appropriate learning behaviours this will help create a positive learning culture.

It is important to make these discussions with the alphas seem normal so that they don't feel like they are receiving special treatment. One approach is to talk to lots of employees (ensuring that you include the alphas) with the pretence of including as many people as you can.

Major organisational change

When there is a major change in an organisation an alpha employee can make things very difficult and can even block the change if they gain enough support from their peers. Consider a major change such as an overhaul of procedures, or an even bigger change such as a merger or new acquisition.

Often senior management are focused on the logistics of implementing and managing the change and it can be difficult for them to consider and involve the lower levels of the organisation in a meaningful way.

The impact of events can be magnified or minified by the influence of alpha employees.

These conditions are ripe for feelings of disempowerment and perceived betrayal of trust. This can be magnified or minified by the influence of alpha employees.

Some organisations will appoint a “change manager” but typically this role is limited to overseeing the logistics of the change, rather than involving people in the process.

A role for a “whip” in major organisational change?

I wonder whether in times of major organisational change there could a role for a “whip” – akin to a whip in the political arena. In politics a whip is an “enforcer” of party discipline.

In organisational change I think a so-called whip could be responsible for involving and empowering the workforce during the period of transition or change.

Is there a role for a whip – to whip up support for major change?

They would hear and address concerns. They would essentially whip up support for the change. There would be no better way to gain the support than to have the backing of the alphas. Of course while including as many people as possible in the process so as not to give the alphas special treatment.

Major organisational change can be traumatic for employees and can result in the development of negative cultures. These cultures can take a long time to reverse and can result in high staff turnover. It seems to me that this is an important issue to address and that the alpha employees could have a significant role.

The alpha student

I originally started thinking about this issue over 10 years ago as a result of my experience teaching university tutorials. Some individuals clearly had more influence on the classroom culture than others. This is not unique to tutorials, or even learning environments, as I have discussed, it is present in any group and we see this phenomenon in our workplaces.

In my teaching career I have taught almost 200 different tutorial groups of between approximately 10 and 30 students. Every group has been very different despite my teaching style remaining relatively constant. At my university the cohort was highly variable, with ages ranging from around 18 to 70 or more with a wide mix of cultures and backgrounds. Some of the variability of classroom culture could be readily explained by the demographics of the group. For example a group with a high proportion of school-leavers would typically have a different culture to groups with more mature age students.

What I quickly discovered, as any teacher, trainer or facilitator will know, is that some individuals have more influence than others. They more readily expressed their opinions and were listened to. This shaped others’ expectations, values and ideas and importantly it also shaped others’ actions.

Students were required to complete readings before tutorials, but this didn’t mean that they did. There were few sanctions for failing to complete the readings. It was not directly assessed and there were no consequences or punishments available to teachers to extract the desired behaviour.

One would hope that since the university documentation stated it was required, and the teacher stated it was required, and it was logical that it should be done, that the students would do it. Depending on the group this was often not the case. Students would believe, or come to believe through the influence of others, that it was not required.

The interesting thing was that most first year students would start the semester thinking they had to do the readings. But over the first few weeks the wider university culture would exert its influence on the group

and this would change. Regardless of what I said.

Students talk to each other during and outside of tutorials. Students sitting in the library may see a friend and ask them what they are doing. If the student replies that they are completing their readings, they may say: “Why are you doing that? You don’t need to do that. No one bothers.”

Teachers have to fight against the tide of the wider university culture, and even societal culture, to create strong positive learning cultures in their groups. This can be very difficult or even impossible to do alone. Our voice is drowned out by the overwhelming weight of counter evidence of “how things are or should be”. We need the support of the alpha students who can help to influence more positive cultures. And the positive cultures of individual groups can help to change the wider university cultures.

I’d like to acknowledge the contribution of my colleagues in the Faculty of Science at the University of the Sunshine Coast who through extensive discussions on this issue helped me to formulate my thoughts on this issue. Our meetings were an excellent example of a community of practice where we were all able to improve our professional skills and receive support for any challenging issues we encountered in our work.