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HAVE you ever experienced something like this? Sitting at a coffee place with your friends and the question of “what is the current ‘it’ song” pops up. Someone mentions a song, which happens to be your absolute favourite. “OMG, that song is so overrated and it’s so boring and lame,” one of your friends says dismissively.

All your other friends seem to agree with the statement and have a laugh about how bad the song is. You, sitting there knowing this is the song you listen to every single day because it is your jam, just inwardly admit that it is your “it” song but outwardly agree with your friends that the song is indeed lame and boring.

What you just experienced can be referred to as peer influence or, more accurately, social influence. Social influence is when we choose to display certain types of behaviours or thoughts in order to be included in your group of friends or cliques.

Being socially influenced by certain decisions or opinions held by your peers can sometimes influence the way you perform certain tasks. Some common ways of social influence are when we influence others to follow our own opinions, make others act according to our will and use authoritative pressure to make them behave a certain way.

Have you had the strong urge to turn towards the door when everyone else does in a meeting room? Under the huge umbrella of social influence, one of the common aspects that we can focus on today is conformity.

The nature of conformity is when we change our behaviour or actions to closely match those of others. The need to conform can be separated into two different types.

First, the normative social influence – the need to act in ways that we feel will help others to like and accept us. We tend to match our actions with the norms of society, which give us a sense of belonging to a group by intentionally or unintentionally using others as a benchmark to be classified as “normal” and acceptable.

For example, you really dislike the personality of Leader A in the office because you cannot tolerate the way this leader manipulates others into agreements but, just because everyone else idolises Leader A, you quietly engage in normative social influence just to fit in the group.

Ever caught yourself in the act of following what is set to be the norm? For example, trying to like someone who is loved by everyone else even though you do not agree to it? That is normative social influence.

HOW WE COMPLY WITH CONFORMITY

BRIDGING THE GAP OF PEER PRESSURE



The next type of conformity is the informative social influence. This is where we extract cues from others when we are unclear on how to behave. Ever heard of the term “copycat”? Well, here is the “why” and “when” we copy others.

Firstly, we feel the urge to follow the cues of another person’s behaviour when we do not know how to behave in a situation. For example, you are attending fine dining for the first time and do not know why there are so many different sizes of forks and spoons on your left and right; nor do you know how to use them.

So, what will you do? You conform to the actions of people around you assuming that they know the functions of each utensil and when to use them.

Secondly, it is difficult to make a decision when there are too many choices. You are on a shopping trip with your friends and stumble upon a nail parlour for a quick manicure.

Since there are literally hundreds of colours to pick from, you get confused and seek advice or information from

those around you to pick out a colour.

Lastly, crisis 101! When you are stuck in a situation and are desperate to make a decision, you look for someone who can make the decision for you instantly because you are in a time crunch. For example, where to eat.

This is a problem we always face when it comes to deciding on a place to have our meals. Are you the person who always answers, “I don’t know, lah where to eat” when it comes to the question of where to eat? Fear not, because there will always be that one person in your group who can make a decision for you instantly, and you always tend to appreciate their decisions because they somehow provide a solution for your growling pangs of hunger.

Informative social influence is basically the type of conformity that we oblige to when we are not sure of our own ability to make a decision. We then outsource it to someone else who can tell us what to do or, how to behave.

On the other hand, normative social influence is where people with lower self-esteem – or individuals who seek approval from others – will experience this influence.

In a nutshell, be it social influence or peer influences, we as individuals do have the final say in things we choose to believe and react to.

Always be aware of making a conscious decision regarding the issues you are facing to minimise the effects of social influences. Take on opinions and advice as long as it does not affect your own integrity in decision-making.

Also, when you are cracking under pressure, do ensure you consider your personal preferences for choices rather than place too much focus on what other people are doing or saying.

Although the social influence and urge to comply with conformity might be extremely high in certain situations, do not forget that you have the ability to make your own choices at the end of the day.

■ Sashi is currently pursuing a degree in psychology and previously worked with Leaderonomics.

She is a book enthusiast who is always seeking to spread her contagious love and care, and enjoys meeting new people to share valuable experiences with.

By **JACK CHUA**
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HOW OFFICE POLITICS CAN HELP OR HINDER YOUR CAREER

WHEN somebody mentions “office politics”, the foremost things that come to mind are the unpleasant memories we have of selfish manipulative co-workers, managers or subordinates. Politics is pervasive, and most of us have experienced it at least once in our careers.

We might recall an instance when we have been blamed for someone else’s mistake, or when we have been bullied by jealous co-workers, or when an annoying colleague takes all the credit for our hard work. All these are oftentimes inevitable manifestations of politics in the workplace.

In today’s world, the term “politics” is so loaded with negativity that most people associate it with

the counterproductive aspects we see in the workplace. Social scientists who study politics in organisations tend to have a different view.

For psychologists like Professor Gerald Ferris, from Florida State University, politics is about understanding people and using that understanding to influence others. Organisational politics are not inherently good or bad – it is about how we use them.

In fact, according to Professor Ferris, having some political savvy could be vital in helping you along your career path. Nevertheless, this does not deny the fact that workplace politics can lead to negative and harmful consequences.

We will be looking at how politics can be harmful to an organisation, as well as some of the ways it can be beneficial if used wisely.

THE DARK SIDE OF POLITICS

As social beings, our ability to understand others and make them do what we want them to do often takes centre stage. Here are four ways that politics can have a harmful effect in the workplace.

#1 POWER CORRUPTS

People can become carried away when they are entrusted with power. As the English historian, Lord Acton famously said, “Power tends to

corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

In a classic study by psychologist David Kipnis, participants made up of business majors were assigned to supervise their own teams to complete an administrative task. Half of the participants were given the power to punish their teammates (by reducing their pay or firing them), while the other half received no such privileges.

The leaders who were given power were twice as likely to threaten their team with punishment, more likely to berate their teammates on their quality of work and were less willing to work with their teammates in future.

The leaders that received no power, on the other hand, had to rely on their ability to keep workers happy and persuade them to contribute more.

Today, changes in organisational structure have helped to reduce the damaging effect of coercive power, such as having a flatter hierarchy, removing layers of bureaucracy and promoting a work culture that focuses on equality rather than authority.

To read the rest of Jack’s story, his three more reasons for why office politics are a curse and the four reasons they could actually help, visit bit.ly/officetalks