

Avoiding Social Loafing and Improving Team Dynamics

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Do you remember back in high school when a teacher would assign student to teams to do a project and one or two would do all the work while everyone else chatted? Whether you were doing the work or were chatting, you were experiencing a phenomenon known as social loafing: the tendency for people on teams to exert less effort than they would if they worked alone.

Early experiments with tug-of-war demonstrated that members of a team exerted less effort



pulling a rope than individuals alone. Each individual's sense of responsibility decreases so that any single person feels less accountable for the end result. While this phenomenon is irritating when a student fails to get an A on the biology project, it can have potentially devastating consequences for businesses that rely on effective team dynamics to achieve critical goals.

Research suggests many different causes for social loafing, including the “sucker effect” – individuals avoid being the poor sucker who gets stuck doing other people’s work. Another factor is “dispensability”: if individuals perceive their skills and knowledge to be nonessential to the team, they may hang back. “Fairness” can be another problem if age, seniority, ethnicity, gender, or other factors mean that individuals’ voices are not heard in the team’s decision making process; then they are less likely to participate fully.

However, researchers have also identified factors, which can combat social loafing in the workplace, and encourage active participation from each member of a team.

1. **Familiarity:** It is easier to hang back in an anonymous crowd. However, when everyone in the team knows one another well, individuals are more likely to put forth more effort.
2. **Small Groups:** The smaller the team, the harder it is for a social loafer to avoid involvement.
3. **Individual Assessment:** It has been statistically proven that when each individual knows his or her work will be evaluated separately, he or she is likely to work harder.
4. **Clear Goals:** If a team is given very clear and precise goals, it will be more effective in working together to achieve them.
5. **Specific Assignments:** Teams are more effective if each member plays a specific and valuable role with well-defined responsibilities.
6. **Voice:** If an individual feels other team members listen to his or her voice; he or she is more likely to participate fully.

Social loafing is a fairly basic concept with some wide-ranging implications. Fortunately with a little forethought, leaders can take steps to ensure there are no loafers on their team.

For more information about this or other leadership topics

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