Prevent Social Loafing

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Social loafing is a name given to the phenomenon where one or more people fail to pull their fair share of the load. We see evidence of it in every aspect of our lives from family slackers who leave messes for others to clean up, to sports teams where some players like to skip practice, to hospitals where some staff work at their own pace even when resources are stretched to the max. We see it in church groups where one person will gladly take credit, even though she was not present at any of the events or meetings.

In a work setting, social loafing is the single biggest reason for team stress. I contend it is a rare team that does not experience some form of social loafing, and it creates ill will among the group every time. The reason for the ubiquitous nature of this problem is that the work is never equally accomplished by all members of the team. Some people will have issues that prevent them from contributing as much as others. The issues may be legitimate, like a death in the family, or a chronic health condition, or they may be fabricated. Since the load is never completely equal, those who pull more than their fair share become resentful of those who get equal credit but fail to do equal work.

A variation of the work setting is in the area of volunteer groups. It gets more tricky in these groups because people are stepping up to volunteer their time and talent for a cause. In the commercial business arena, if a person slacks off, then he or she can be punished or even terminated, but in the volunteer world, there is much less leverage because the time is donated. In this case, some other form of inducement, usually peer pressure, is the only leverage that can help reduce social loafing.

Since this problem is debilitating to teams and is universal, is there a simple cure for the disease? I believe there is, but I also think it is not often used very well. The trick is to create an agreement at the start that everyone will pull his or her share of the load. People usually buy into the concept at the start of a team: after all, fair is fair. It is only after the team gets going that life happens and the slackers are revealed. Good intentions at the start of an activity are necessary but not sufficient to prevent social loafing.

What is needed is an agreed-upon penalty or consequence that will befall a person who does not perform as previously stated. Let me share two examples of how this works and how the concept really does nip the problem of social loafing in the bud. I will use one example in an online university setting and a second example in a volunteer organization.

I do a lot of teaching in the online environment. Students have individual assignments and team assignments (usually papers to write) where there is a lot of work to be done by several remote individuals. Students come into the team environment with all good intentions where all students will do their fair share of the work, but inevitably one or two people will fall behind the pace and hold the team back. This results in the other members having to scramble to get the paper finished at the last minute because one student did not do the assigned part. That infuriates the other students because their grade on the team paper is dependent on everyone pulling a fair share of the load. In every single team there is this same problem to some degree. Occasionally it is hard to detect due to a particular set of individuals, but even there I see signs of stress when one student procrastinates a bit and leaves the others waiting and wondering.

The cure is so simple. If the penalty for goofing off is spelled out specifically at the start, then the stress goes away and performance improves. Suppose the team agrees that all team members will submit their part of the paper three days before it is due, to allow time for editing and clean up. Now comes the critical element. The team agrees that if one member does not comply with the agreed timing, his name will be left off the team paper, and he will receive no points for the weekly assignment. That is a very stiff penalty because it will immediately lower the final grade for a course for that student by one letter grade.

By insisting on a specific consequence to be agreed upon at the start of the course (when everyone has good intentions) then the social loafing rarely occurs. Reason: The would-be slacker has already agreed to accept the dreaded consequence, so there is no doubt about what will happen to him if he fails to meet expectations. If he tests the system and finds he got no points for the assignment, he cannot cry foul. He already signed off on the consequence. The result is that he never does it again.

A second example is from a volunteer organization. Here we cannot specify leaving the person's name off a paper because there is none. Instead we need to get more creative with a penalty. The time to brainstorm possible consequences for social loafing is at the start when the team is forming. The team should brainstorm acceptable behaviors and then the group needs to identify what will happen to an individual if he or she does not abide by the established rules. Let's take a specific example of a group that is planning an event. Each volunteer has a specific role to play, and they identify that any individual member not doing the job will be responsible for providing refreshments at the next

meeting or washing the dishes after the meeting. This penalty is not debilitating, but the embarrassment factor of having to bring in goodies for the rest of the team should be a strong deterrent against social loafing. You can come up with any specific penalty as long as it has two elements 1) the penalty is specified before the slacking occurs, and 2) everyone agrees to enforce the penalty.

Having a specific penalty associated with failure to perform up to good intentions is the most effective way to prevent social loafing or deal with it when it happens. Try it in your group and see how this simple step is like a miracle for better teamwork.

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