

Reducing Conflict 38 Prevent Social Loafing

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



“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 most people are maxed out.

Reason for Team Stress

In a work setting, social loafing is one of the biggest reasons 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.

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 it may be that the person is just lazy. 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.

Example from Education Setting

I do a lot of teaching in the online environment. Students have individual assignments and team assignments (usually papers to write) where several remote individuals must do a lot of work on a project.

Students come into the team environment with good intentions assuming 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 condition results in the other members having to scramble to get the paper finished at the last minute because one student did not do his assigned part. That infuriates the other students, because their grades on the team paper may be lower than expected.

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 we spell out a strategy and agreement for working together including a penalty for goofing off specifically at the start, then the stress goes away and performance improves.

Suppose the team agrees that all team members will submit their draft 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 not be on the team paper, and he will receive no points for the 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 agreeing on a specific consequence 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.

Teams in Different Settings

The most common place to observe social loafing is in a team setting at work. If some members of the team are not pulling their fair share of the load, there is going to be conflict. In this instance, having an agreed-upon penalty can drastically cut down on the frequency of the problem occurring.

This theory is more difficult to employ if the team is all volunteers. In these groups, people are stepping up to volunteer their time and talent for a cause. Coming up with a penalty for social loafing in these groups is tricky because if there is conflict, the volunteer can just drop out. In this situation, perhaps the upfront agreement might include having the volunteer find a back-up for when other life priorities make it impossible to carry the load.

There is a cure

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 surface. Good intentions at the start of an activity are necessary but not sufficient to prevent social loafing.

Conclusion

Having a specific penalty associated with failure to perform up to good intentions is an 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.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*