

TEAMS CAN SUFFER FROM PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS.

We all know that working in teams isn't always easy or productive. Problems not only happen; they are common.⁷ Teams often suffer from personality conflicts and work style differences that disrupt relationships and accomplishments. Group members sometimes battle over goals or competing visions. Sometimes they withdraw from active participation because of uncertainty over tasks and relationships. Ambiguous agendas or ill-defined problems can cause teamwork fatigue. Motivation can fall when teams work too long on the wrong things and end up having little to show for it. And, not everyone is always ready to jump in and do a great job on a team. These and other difficulties can easily turn the great potential of teams into frustration and failure.

One of the most troublesome team problems is **social loafing**—the presence of one or more “free-riders” who slack off and allow other team members to do most of the work.⁸ For whatever reason, perhaps the absence of spotlight on personal performance, individuals sometimes work less hard, not harder, when they are part of a group.

What can a team leader do when someone is free-riding? The possibilities include a variety of actions to make individual contributions more visible—rewarding individuals for their contributions, making task assignments more interesting, and keeping group size small so that free-riders are more noticeable. This makes the loafers more susceptible to pressures from peers and to critical leader evaluations. And if you've ever considered free-riding as a team member, think again. You may get away with it in the short term, but your reputation will suffer, and sooner or later it will be “payback” time.

How to Handle Social Loafing

- Reward individuals for contributions.
- Make individuals visible by keeping team size small.
- Encourage peer pressure to perform.
- Make task assignments more interesting.

Social loafing is the tendency of some people to avoid responsibility by free-riding in groups.

“I’LL BE ACTIVE IN DISCUSSIONS, BUT I CAN’T BE A LEADER OR VOLUNTEER FOR ANY EXTRA WORK.”

ETHICS CHECK

Social Loafing May Be Closer Than You Think



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Psychology study: A German researcher asks people to pull on a rope as hard as they can. First, individuals pull alone. Second, they pull as part of a group. Results show people

pull harder when working alone than when working as part of a team. Such social loafing is the tendency to reduce effort when working in groups.

Faculty office: A student wants to speak with the instructor about his team's performance on the last group project. There were four members, but two did almost all the work. The two loafers largely disappeared, showing up only at the last minute to be part of the formal presentation. His point is that the team was disadvantaged because the two free-riders caused a loss of performance capacity.

Telephone call from the boss: “John, I really need you to serve on this committee. Will you do it? Let me know tomorrow.” In thinking about this, I ponder: I'm overloaded, but I don't want to turn down the boss. I'll accept but let the committee members know about my situation. I'll be active in discussions and try to offer viewpoints and perspectives that are helpful. However, I'll let them know up front that I can't be a leader or volunteer for any extra work.

YOUR DECISION?

Whether you call it social loafing, free-riding, or just plain old slacking off, the issue is the same. What right do some people have to sit back in team situations and let other people do all or most of the work? Is this ethical? Does everyone in a group have an ethical obligation to do his or her fair share of the work? Does the fact that John is going to be honest with the other committee members make any difference? Won't he still be a loafer who gets credit with the boss for serving on the committee? Would it be more ethical for him to decline the boss's request?