

PREVENTING SOCIAL LOAFING

1. Keep groups as small as possible
2. Evaluate all members of a group individually
3. Ensure everyone knows their role
4. Nip negative attitudes in the bud
5. Reward individuals for the process rather than teams for outcomes

Optimal Performance Consulting

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Optimal Performance Newsletter

Improving Group Performance in Business & Sport: Part I

Social Loafing

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Ever wonder why it seems like workers put forth less effort when part of a group or committee? Or, why it seems like athletes put forth less effort when part of a team sport? In reality, people DO put forth less effort when their effort is being pooled together with the effort of a group. In the world of psychology, this phenomenon is referred to as social loafing.

Examples of Social Loafing

Social loafing can occur in just about every group situation. Consider these examples:

- In Communist Russia, private farms occupied 1% of the agricultural land but produced 27% of farm output. In other words, the public farms occupied 99% of the land and only accounted for 73% of the output!
- Researchers have found that individuals riding bicycles in groups pedal harder when their individual output is being measured as compared to the total group output.

- Scientists have also found that one man pulling on a rope alone exerted, on average, twice as much pull as when efforts were combined as part of a team.

Impact in Business

Think about the impact that social loafing might make in the business world. With all of the group projects, committees, and group decision-making that occurs in the corporate world, the amount of productivity is dramatically reduced. Consider this: Employees who brain storm in groups will develop fewer, less creative, and more risky ideas than they would have had they brainstormed individually and then come together as a group to share their individual ideas.

Impact in Sport

Think about all the team sports that require all of the players to come together for a common goal of winning (i.e., there are no individual winners). Baseball, football, soccer, and hockey are just a few of such sports. Believe it or not, the individual athletes are putting forth LESS effort when they are part of the team as compared to how they would have performed if they were individuals.

So, the whole is not always greater than the sum of its parts!

Factors affecting Social Loafing and How to Prevent It

First of all, it is important to understand that social loafing is not necessarily a conscious thing. Workers or athletes experiencing this phenomenon may unfairly be characterized as lazy, but it is important to keep in mind that they may not be aware of their loafing. When trying to reduce the impact of social loafing, consider the following factors:

- *Large group size.* The amount of effort will decrease as the size of the group increases. The effect is capped at about 15 members, with workers only outputting approximately 78% of their potential. Therefore, keep groups small in number. (In situations where group numbers are predetermined, it may be advantageous to divide the group into several smaller groups targeting different goals.) And, if possible, have employees work separately on a task before coming together as a group.
- *Repetitive, mundane tasks.* Spice-up tasks as best as possible. Evenly distribute mundane tasks, and rotate responsibilities.
- *Individuals "hiding" in the crowd & avoid taking blame for poor performances.* Ensure that all members of the group will be evaluated for their contributions, since this will encourage all members to put forth

- additional effort to prove themselves.
- *Individuals feeling like their input is not essential.* Ask everyone for their input directly. Rather than asking a group, "Does anyone have any input?" directly ask each individual if they have any input.
- *Individuals not believing their effort is instrumental in achieving outcome.* Make sure that everyone in the group is aware of their role within the group and how their unique individual performance impacts the group.
- *Results not in line with personal goals.* Check-in with the individuals to make sure their personal goals are aligned with that of the organization.
- *Negative attitudes toward tasks becoming contagious.* Nip negative attitudes in the bud before these attitudes can populate throughout the group.
- *Difficulty waiting for delayed gratification.* Rather than rewarding the group with a large reward at the completion of a task, reward the group with frequent, smaller awards along the way. This is also known as rewarding the process and not the outcome.
- *Individuals on teams receiving less rewards than individuals working alone.* Teammates working together receive fewer rewards than individuals working alone. Therefore, you should reward individuals for meeting and/or exceeding their individual role in the task.

- *Individuals knowing they have "eager beaver" types on their teams and letting them do all the work.* Rotate leaders, and hold leaders accountable. Also, it may be helpful to limit the amount of work or put restrictions on certain "eager beaver" types. These go getters must also learn the value of listening to others.
- *Men are more likely to loaf than women.* Avoid same-sex groups, particularly all-male groups.
- *Individualistic cultures (Western) are more likely to loaf than group-oriented cultures (Eastern).* Assuming there is mutual respect, diversity within a group will lead to better production. Therefore, it is beneficial to establish an environment of mutual respect where individuals from all cultures can benefit, and where social loafing is kept at a minimum.
- *Individuals working with strangers and/or those they do not respect.* Take time for team members to get to know one another on a personal and organizational level. It is always amazing to find out that colleagues or teammates know little about another's roles and responsibilities, let alone where they are from.

If your organization or team would like help with this, or any other aspect of performance, please let us know. We'd love to help.φ