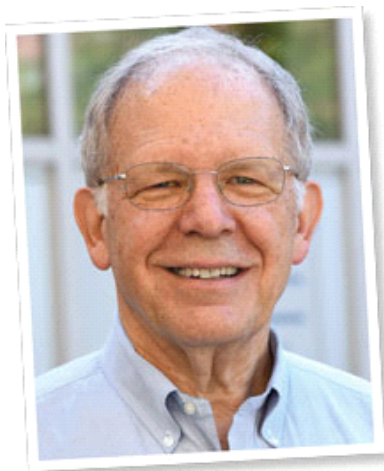


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# Social Loafing—An Impediment to Success

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Why are some teams more effective while others seem to falter and flop? Ask garden centers how they survived and, in many situations thrived, through the COVID-19-infused spring of 2020. Likely what you'll hear most often is how "the team pulled us through."

In the 1890s, a French professor of agricultural engineering, Max Ringelmann, began a series of experiments involving people who pulled on a rope, as in a tug-of-war contest. Some pulled alone and others in teams. Ringelmann's studies found those participants pulling by themselves exerted 15% to 25% more pull on the rope than those who were part of a group. Furthermore, each individual's output lessened as their group grew larger. The professor termed this "Social Loafing" or the tendency to lessen effort because the social body (or team) allows for individual slacking.

The initial scientific studies of social loafing weren't large. Further studies were done in 1979. Recently, interest in the phenomenon has increased with the advent of "dispersed groups" working online from home. There are key environments that increase social loafing, both online and physically in the garden center. These include:

- Lack of individual accountability
- Lack of respect for co-team members
- A task or goal not meaningful to the participant
- Belief the task is hopeless or the goal unobtainable
- Lack of self-satisfaction or group approval
- Unjust distributions of praise and awards for success
- Easy ability to hide in the group (especially seen with larger groups)
- Belief other team members are smarter and more capable
- Penalty-free loafing due to not being held accountable

- Belief other team members are lazy, distracted or disinterested in success
- Fear of being the “fall guy” who does all the work while others get the credit
- “De-individuation” or disassociation from personal accountability and individual achievement

The antidotes to Social Loafing are proven.

- Apply the reverse to each of the situations listed above
- Make the team performing a specific task as small as possible
- Focus the team on collaboration and results rather than internal competition
- Don't duplicate key skills, ensuring each team member participates and shares equally
  - Utilize the acronym SMART—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time—to create challenging goals that match the team's self-definition while giving unity of purpose
- Provide peer evaluations of individual team members to show how each would participate if the team could fire them

Repeated studies have demonstrated women are more likely to perform well in groups. In one prominent study, (Gabrenya, Wang and Latane: 1985), researchers concluded genetic and historic roles continue to make men more individualistic and women more relational. Different ethnic groups also bring disparate attitudes toward group work. While we can debate the why and how this happens, smart leaders will recognize it as another reason to have a diversified workforce. A variety of experiences presents a variety of options.

Social loafing also occurs outside the formal team environment. It's important to know who's really going the extra mile, as well as identifying those who only seem to be producing. Which team members are helping, coaching and supporting their fellow employees? Who's trying to take credit for another's work? Who suggests doable solutions when there's a question or complaint?

For instance, if a bag of potting soil rips, which employee hollers, “Clean up on Aisle 4!” and keeps walking? In the same situation, who grabs a broom and cleans it up with minimal personal aggrandizement? Do they do this when you're not watching? (Video cameras can show what happens when management isn't physically present.) There's a fine line between “spying” and “observing,” so you can determine those who really are team players when management is nowhere in sight.

To grow an organization that has the flexibility to overcome various challenges, you must nurture the spirit of effective teamwork. It might sound trite, but this is both the opposite of Social Loafing and the key to your organization's future success. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 688-1169.*