

Teamwork: Tackling the 'free-rider' problem

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'One member of our team isn't pulling his weight. He doesn't say much in meetings, and when he says he will do something he doesn't produce the goods. He seems to be taking advantage of the fact that we will all get the same mark for our project, so however little he does he will benefit from the work the rest of us do. It's both unfair and highly irritating.'

- Student on a one-year master's course

Let's have a bit of background here. You and other students have been thoroughly socialized throughout your educational experience into the ethos of 'individual achievement'. Learning is something that you essentially do as an individual, and your exam marks, certificates and degree are awarded to you personally. Nowadays, some universities and departments are supposedly promoting 'teamwork' as part of their 'employability agenda', and doing this by forming students into groups – sometimes optimistically labelled teams – and assigning them projects to do. However, there appears to be a widespread absence of assistance to students to work creatively and effectively as members of teams, and to deal with the interpersonal issues that inevitably come up in project work.

'Free riding' is the name given to the behaviour of a team member who deliberately limits the work that he or she puts in, in the knowledge that they will nevertheless benefit from the efforts of the other members. Note that word 'deliberately': the implication is that you can see into his mind and identify the thoughts and feelings behind his behaviour. But these can be very complex, and you need to be very, very cautious about interpreting the behaviour that you see. Here are some possibilities:

It could be that your team-mate feels under pressure to devote more time and effort to the project than he feels is appropriate, and is backing out of doing the work entailed. So even though he has no intention of taking advantage of the work of the rest of you, he may appear to be doing so.

Alternatively, it could be that when tasks were allocated the noisier and more forceful members of the group were the first to bid for those that they preferred, so it ended up that the quietest, most diffident member found himself left with a task for which he felt very ill-equipped. Such a person in that situation might nevertheless have felt it his duty to take the task on and did so,

while keeping his fingers crossed that he would be able to master it. If he subsequently floundered, he may have been reluctant to ask for help, and instead withdrew: not turning up to meetings, not replying to emails, etc. Almost certainly he is experiencing a great deal of discomfort and stress, but the rest of you may conclude that he is deliberately free-riding.

It is almost inevitable, too, that at some times in the progress of a project some people will be doing more work than others. For example, a couple of people – with more advanced technical skills, perhaps, or a shared idea for the product – might effectively take charge of the project, and the others begin to feel they're being shut out. The 'taking over' may not come about deliberately; if you are one of the 'activists' you are perhaps being carried along by your own enthusiasm and putting in two or three times as many hours as the other members. But if you're not one of the activists, you are very likely to feel unvalued, or under-valued. Indeed, you may be unable to see how you can make a contribution in these circumstances. So your motivation drops, and you don't work as hard or enthusiastically as you could – and your team-mates think you're free-riding.

The fourth possibility, of course, is that your team-mate simply has never learned how to work co-operatively with other people, and has no idea of how to do it and not the slightest inclination to learn.

So what you should do? The first thing, I suggest, is to find out what's in the supposedly free-riding student's mind. Is one of the above four scenarios in play? Or another, different one? Perhaps just one of you could talk to him (rather than summoning him to a 'trial by his peers'). A quiet talk may uncover what is really going on for him. It may be that he feels he has by now cut himself off from the team and you may be able to reassure him that the door is still open for him to return.

After such an exploratory talk, if he wants to come back on board and you want him to, at the next meeting of the whole team each of you could say how you see the situation and how you feel about it. Note that this meeting is not – I repeat, not – an occasion for accusing or blaming. Indeed, statements beginning 'You are...' should be avoided. What you can and should say is: 'This is how I see the situation, and this is how I feel about it. ...' The only person who is an authority on your perceptions and feelings is yourself, and you must speak up for yourself: no-one can speak for you. And by the same token, you can speak for no-one else.

Once perceptions and feelings are out in the open, and the air is cleared, you can compare your perceptions of what's going on. Are some individual tasks turning out to involve much more work than originally envisaged? Are the activists indeed charging along fuelled by their own enthusiasm? Is it indeed unclear what role the others can be taking on now?

Then it's time to turn to the question: How shall we proceed from this point on? Do you need to do more to acknowledge members' contributions? Do you need to make a fresh assessment of what tasks need to be carried out, and/or revise the allocation of tasks to individuals or pairs? Can some team members join in with the 'fun' work? Could some take on more of the workload later? Maybe those who have been feeling excluded will recover their motivation and involvement if the pair of activists carry on as they have been but make a point of reporting regularly to the others and consulting them on any issues they are faced with.

If, despite your efforts, you have clear evidence that there is some free-riding going on – someone is deliberately taking advantage of the rest of you and your hard work – it is, in my view, perfectly appropriate to let your teachers know about the situation and ask their help in dealing with it.

Perhaps, however, you feel that the issue is one that you should deal with yourselves. May I suggest that the important thing to deal with is not so much the behaviour of the free-rider but your own feelings. It would not be surprising if you feel very angry, and frustrated by the uncertainty which is inevitable when, say, someone takes away his individual tasks and then goes quiet and fails to come back to the group with the work he has done, or keeps making excuses but promises to deliver 'soon'. In this situation you don't know whether to do the work yourselves or to trust the other member and hold the project in abeyance until he produces, while hoping that what is produced will indeed be what is needed. The problem may be not so much that one member is unreliable and unproductive – aggravating though that is – but that the conscientious members are crippled by their feelings of anger towards the free-rider and of frustration resulting from their inability to influence events and from their dependence on the free-rider.

In such a situation, your first priority has to be to free yourself from your dependence on the free-rider. You could have a 'last-ditch' strategy: ask the free-rider if he is encountering difficulties that he hasn't made known to the other members of the team; explain to him your difficulty with the situation you find yourselves in; give him a deadline for the producing of work; and agree among yourselves how you will do the work if it is not forthcoming from him.

Above all, though, you need a contingency plan. Not a contingency plan for what you will do if the free-rider doesn't produce, but a contingency plan for what you will do if he does. Plan your work programme on the basis that he won't produce (make sure, though, that you tell him what you are doing and why), but be prepared to react flexibly if – to your amazement – he does come up with the goods.

Dealing with free-riders can actually be a worthwhile learning experience for you, if you can develop strategies to channel your anger and frustration into positive action.

Let's not forget the role of teachers here. In setting up group projects, teachers are laying students open to very challenging and potentially stressful circumstances. It behoves them to exercise some care for their students, rather than abandoning them to events. They should get some training in facilitating groups and always be on hand. Make it clear to your teachers that you do not expect to be abandoned by them while your project is under way.

Teachers should certainly give some thought to the possibility that some students might try to take a free ride – if yours haven't, prod them! – and they should maximize the incentive to work as a team by providing for a proportion of marks to come from a self- and peer-assessment. Students can be asked to evaluate the contributions of themselves and other team members, in terms of their attendance at meetings; how well they interact with others (including making it easy for others to join in); their contribution to planning the project, leadership and management; and their contribution to producing the deliverables. The idea is to make each of you more aware of how you are regarded by other members of your group. (A marking system can be adopted which disregards inflation of one's own marks, a self-assessment being ignored if it is appreciably higher – or lower – on any criterion than the aggregate assessment of that student supplied by the others.)

(Based on Chapter 16 of *Conquer Study Stress!* and Part Five of *Successful Teamwork!*)