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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Wow! That Was Easier Than I Expected!

William C. Levin

Lately I've been wondering about the American faith in the value of cooperative work. Like anyone else who grew up in this country, I remember lots of lessons during my childhood about how much more we can accomplish if we have help. For example, I think at least a dozen films have made the point via a barn-raising scene in which neighbors from farms all over the county are seen marching purposefully over hills and down country roads, hammers and saws at the ready, to "help out a neighbor." I loved how the whole job took only a few minutes during which everyone sang, engaged in lots of good-natured joshing, and afterward had a big picnic while it was still light. On television, childrens' programs like Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers have always taught us how important it is to work together. It's more fun and we get more done. In addition, we get to cooperate. And the lessons taught to children continue to find expression

in our adult lives. Friends in private industry tell me their time is typically split among numbers of groups that have been "tasked" with specific jobs. Managers have available seemingly endless varieties of seminars and workshops to help train their staffs members to work more efficiently together. And cooperative learning is a hot new trend in the education field. The belief here is that if working together is more efficient and effective, then learning together should be as well.

So, what makes me wonder about the wisdom of all this working-together stuff? It's not that I'm an isolate, a go-it-alone curmudgeon who thinks that people who need help getting things done are weaklings and work-group wooses. No, I have experienced the joys of working with others. I know that my brother's garage was cleaned much faster than it would have been if he had cleaned it alone. I know that the leaves at our house were pulled from places I never would have bothered with if Jeanne had not been raking by my side. I am certain that there are ideas in much of my written work that I would never have imagined without my co-authors. And I'll even concede that there are jobs that, left to my own devices, would never have been done at all. Thank goodness someone else was aware that our barn needed raising. We got it done in no time. No, my question about the value of cooperative work comes from a suspicion

that its reputation for efficiency is not pure.

Think of the times you have seen a number of people working together on a project. Haven't you always seen at least one unusually relaxed person, and usually several? These are the people who, while others are busily working at some part of the task at hand, are taking the opportunity to relax against a door-jamb or in conversation with some other group member. In some cases the loafing takes the form of "supervision" which often looks suspiciously like watching other people work. I don't think there is anything wrong with loafing. I'm pretty good at it myself, and I think a certain amount of not doing what you're supposed to be doing is an intensely human and sane thing. Also, I'm not trying to question the value of work groups on the grounds that some people are lazy (though some are), but because they are not the paragons of efficiency that some descriptions of them would suggest. Work groups are less than perfectly efficient because loafing is actually an inevitable consequence of having people work together. Consider some evidence from a classic study on the subject that working in groups may actually reduce the efficiency of individuals compared with working alone.

In 1979 the social psychologist Bibb Latane and some colleagues did a series of experiments in which they measured

the work output of a number of male college students in four separate working conditions: 1) each student working alone, 2) each as a member of a two-person group, 3) each as a member of a four-person group, and 4) each as a member of a six-person group. The "work" being measured was



clapping and cheering. It was chosen as the form of work to measure because it was found to be relatively tiring in a short period of time (try clapping a cheering as loudly as you can for more than a few seconds), because it is a behavior that commonly occurs in groups and because it is easy to measure accurately with instruments.

The experimenters put the subjects of the study in a soundproofed room and asked them to clap and cheer as loudly as they could for five seconds. By measuring each subject's work level when alone, a baseline was established for comparing his performance in groups of two, four and six members. The results were extremely consistent over a series of trials, and should be extremely surprising to fans of the efficiency of work groups. As the group size increased, the work output per group member decreased significantly. When measured as lone individuals, subjects in the study averaged 3.7 dynes per cm (a measure of sound volume). Working in pairs, the average noise figure per subject dropped by 30 percent to 2.6 dynes per cm. In groups of four, the noise figure per subject (1.8 dynes per cm) was only half the figure for individual efforts. And in groups of six the noise figure per subject (1.5 dynes per cm) was 40 percent as efficient as when working alone. (The data showing the relationship between group size and work output are shown graphically in the figure at left.)

What happened to the increased efficiency that working together was supposed to provide? The study found just the opposite. Working in groups consistently decreased the work output of each member. In fact, the larger the work group, the greater the reduction in efficiency per group member. In one sense,

the work of the group was more efficient than the work of individuals. That is, as groups increased in size, the total amount of work done increased. Subjects in the study who worked in pairs made more noise than either could alone, and groups of four and six made more noise yet. But the increases in noise making did not increase in proportion to the increase in group size. Why not?

The researchers attributed the tendency of work output to be lower in groups to a phenomenon they called *social loaf-*

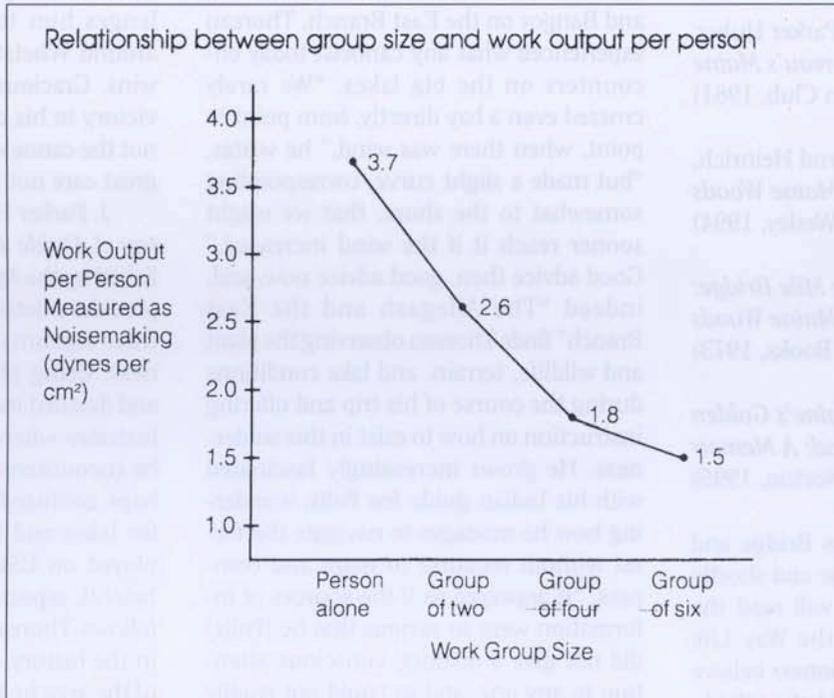
less than you would alone.

A second explanation of social loafing is that group work settings allow people to diffuse responsibility. Working alone you are clearly responsible for your work, but in a group you can get "lost in the crowd" in terms of work output. The loss of work efficiency is made up for by the *apparent* increase in work that the group accomplishes as a whole. Bigger groups make more noise than individuals or smaller groups, enforcing belief in the efficiency of group effort. Members of

groups actually feel they accomplish more than they would alone (in a sense they do), but not when measured as individual effort. So, when you hear the saying "many hands make light the work," take it in its full meaning. Working in a group, each members actually works less. Certainly the work seems lighter. It is.

I suppose there are worthwhile benefits of working together other than increased work as measured by the output of each individual. For example, it is likely that people who work in groups feel they are

very productive. They must also get a strong, if somewhat inflated, sense of the value of cooperation. Work should be enjoyable, and the feeling that you are doing well and dealing well with others is valuable in its own right. But we need to recognize that the benefits of working together are not limitless and that people do not, in fact, work more efficiently in social settings than they do when alone. Of course, it may be that when I am left to myself I tend to do nothing, but while working with others I might do at least a little work..... Hmmm.



ing and began to suspect that its origins lay in the fact that the total work output of groups is greater than that of individuals alone. When you work alone you are clearly responsible for the work done. Not only can the output be attributed clearly to you alone, but the credit is yours as well. When asked to work in a group, you may question how much work each other person will do, and how much credit or blame you can expect for your effort level. Since the work of a group is measured collectively, systems of individual reward are not in effect. So, social loafing may be the result of your expectation that you will not be rewarded in proportion to your work. In anticipation of this, you simply work