



Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

Amy Showalter
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Rare is the government relations professional whose organization has not been a member of a coalition. Rare as well is the government relations professional who has not had to live through the vicissitudes of volunteer teams, task forces, work groups, PAC boards, or similar working groups. The individuals who comprise these "teams" are not paid, but their performance (or lack of it) *can* impact our destiny.

The benefits of teams are many, but there is an unending hue and cry from GR professionals that their teams, whether PAC boards, grassroots teams, or coalition members, simply aren't functioning as intended. Today's organizations hold as an article of faith that teams perform better than individuals do at decision making. Nevertheless, many times, team just don't deliver. Consider A.T. Kearney's findings that "nearly seven out of 10 teams fail to produce the desired results." (*The Trouble with Teams*, 1995).

This article can't possibly address all of the possibilities for team dysfunctions (for example, team member evaluation, misattribution errors, communication and collective intelligence, team conflict, creativity, leadership, and virtual teams, just to name a few). It will, however, address one factor that hugely impacts team productivity: "social loafing," also known as the people who "show up" but never do anything—or show up, talk, and *then* don't do anything.

I'm certainly not averse to teams, and I've had stellar personal experience with grassroots teams. However, for every one positive example, I hear of about 10 that fall short of their goals. Team members aren't bonding with each other, they are barking at each other. The main complaint? Team members aren't following through.

Social Loafing

We've all been on a team where 20 percent of the team members do 80 percent of the work—a few board members recruit for the PAC, a couple of organizations in your coalition make the effort to mobilize their members on an important issue, or one member of your GR staff reviews and edits the department's Web site.

I grew up on a farm, and there are great lessons from the farm. A German agricultural engineer named Max Ringelmann studied farm labor efficiency and found that productivity decreases in large work groups (for me, that meant a work group of two, as my brother did most of the hard labor—and yes, I was the social loafer). Fifty years later, Kravitz and Martin found that on an almost molecular level, human

beings simply do not work as hard in groups as they do when they work alone. This is social loafing.

It's human nature for motivation to diminish in a team setting. As a team member, we believe there's a possibility that others can or will do almost all of the work necessary for the team to succeed. This means that "free riders" benefit from the work of others. The free riders hurt our team performance. How do we change the social loafing dynamic?

Solutions to the Social-Loafing Lifestyle

Many people feel their contribution simply won't be sufficient to justify the effort. We want to be recognized for our work. We need look no further than voter turnout for an apt illustration. Most everyone agrees that voting is the right thing to do. Why, then, did only 64 percent of the eligible U.S. population vote in the last presidential election? People may feel their vote has such a small impact on the outcome that it's just not worthwhile.

Similarly, team members may feel they lack the ability to positively influence a team's outcome. We have a great desire to preserve our psychological energy. Hence, if I can't make a difference, and I won't get recognized for it, I probably will sit out of the team's discussion and associated tasks.

This explains why grassroots involvement can fall short of expectations. We tell our grassroots team members only about our grassroots successes. They naturally think, "If they are so successful, why do they need me?" It's vital to recount grassroots shortcomings as well.

Identify Contributions

Identify team member contributions. What have coalition members done to advance the cause? Be specific, and enumerate contributions that you want duplicated. Are the contributions distributed to the coalition members or posted on an easily accessible Web site?

What about your faithful PAC recruiters? What about your PAC board members who help answer tough PAC questions or find colleagues to help recruit others? Where are their achievements noted?

Ditto for your grassroots team leaders. How many new members have they recruited during the last quarter? Who consistently responds to your calls to action?

Anyone who has worked in sales knows that sales performance data are posted throughout the organization. This tactic also helps inculcate your culture with the importance of your coalition, grassroots, and PAC team contributions.

Help Them Use Their Brains

Social loafing tends to increase when team tasks don't involve interesting or attractive work. People want to perform interesting tasks. My research with *Fortune's* "Power 25" revealed that one of the main ways that they keep their "varsity" grassroots team members motivated is to *delegate important work to them*. Several organizations reported that their grassroots team leaders edit staff-created volunteer materials, and others distribute issue position papers to volunteer team members for

review before publication. Other organizations ask key volunteers to attend meetings and conferences on their behalf. The work is stimulating and acknowledges the team members' value.

Do you delegate substantial work to your team members? Are your PAC board members required to do homework on candidates being considered for contributions because they can impact a contribution decision, or are they a "rubber stamp" board?

Recognize Your Team Members

As many of you who regularly read my articles know, recognition and reward are two different things. Both should be strategic, but recognition tends to motivate more than reward. The goal is to recognize the behavior you want more of. Greenberg's research showed that it is more important for team members to feel appreciated and acknowledged *by fellow team members* than by outsiders. He also found that people are more likely to cheat and steal from the organization when they feel they've been unfairly treated. Perhaps this portends a new way to test morale: The more sticky pads and pens that are missing, the worse the organizational morale.

Do you promote recognition in front of team members, or do you compliment team members in private? Any acknowledgement is better than silence, but why not maximize the opportunity to reduce social loafing?

Build Team Member Trust

Cohesive teams are less likely to experience loafing. When there is friendship among the members, the sense of safety and trust within the group facilitates equal action by group members.

Again, this is another finding that became apparent in my *Fortune* "Power 25" research. When I asked the organization leaders how they helped keep and motivate their high-performing team members, "personal relationships" was one of the top three factors mentioned. It's hard to say no to one's friends.

Do you facilitate trust and friendship among team members?

Create a Team Pledge

I'm a big believer in volunteer role descriptions for individuals and teams. Ideally, teams should also have a statement of objectives and practices—a "pledge," if you will. It should be in writing and widely accessible. According to Katzenbach and Smith, the best teams invest a tremendous amount of time and effort exploring and agreeing on a purpose that belongs to the team collectively and individually. They also found that the best teams translate their common purpose into the specific performance roles. Without this, teams can degenerate into a lot of activity without achievement.

Many of my clients affectionately refer to me as a "measurement Nazi" of sorts, so I rejoiced at finding my belief validated in the research. We have an obligation to be as precise as possible as to our intended outcomes, and how those outcomes are manifested in specific behavior. We need specific benchmarks and performance indicators to make the whole effort worthwhile.

Limit Team Size

Olson and Kurr have found that as teams get larger, personal contributions become less important. In short, as team size increases, feelings of anonymity increase and, you guessed it, social loafing increases. While team size can't always be controlled, the literature reveals that teams of five to six are ideal. If you've never been in a coalition that small or had grassroots teams that small, perhaps there are ways to break down your existing membership to small subcommittee teams to increase cohesion.

A national healthcare association client asked me to facilitate a team meeting to completely redesign the advocacy website. The association wanted results in one day. Despite never having witnessed such team productivity before, I agreed to facilitate the meeting. Thankfully, there were six people in the meeting, and in five hours, we came up with a new website concept. Best of all, the team size allowed for equal participation among the team members. It was a true collaboration rather than an influence contest.

Know of a Terrific Team?

In an effort to learn from positive team experiences and see what's possible, tell me about your excellent team, whether a PAC board, grassroots team, or coalition. I'll feature you in a future ASAE & The Center *Government Relations* e-newsletter. Contact me at amy@showaltergroup.com or 513-762-7668.

*Amy Showalter is a grassroots and PAC consultant
who helps organizations improve their grassroots and PAC productivity.
www.showaltergroup.com 513.762.7668*

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American Society of Association Executives
The ASAE Building
1575 I St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20005-1103
Phone: (888) 950-2723, (202) 371-0940 (in Washington, DC)
Fax: (202) 371-8315*