

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #55

© Milton James 2007

Topic: The practice of participants working in groups versus separately

This Note discusses the problems our participants have when working as a **collective** and why its best they work **separately** or **coactively**.

In my April 2005 report titled; '*Report on the trial of placing young Indigenous people from Cape York Peninsula region into private sector employment picking fruit in southern states*', I touched upon the practical issue of our young participants working collectively versus working individually. At the start of this trial, all the participants were working on a collective contract. This proved to be a real problem. Quoting from my report I said:

The discrepancy in the productivity of each participant was enormous. The most productive workers double the effort of the least productive. The problem with working as a collective is that all workers are being paid equally regardless of individual performance. Understandably, this resulted in widespread discontent and the most productive choosing to dramatically reduce their productivity. I then advised the most productive to go it alone, which they did. The productivity of those who went alone dramatically increased along with their income. This in turn motivated the moderate workers to also work independently and before long their productivity increased. It was interesting to see that the least productive workers continued to prefer working as a collective and their productivity remained extremely low. I later introduced the rule that nobody was to work as a collective. It then became clear who was dragging the chain and it was they that became the focus of my attention.

Later in the trial when the Victorian group was moved from Shepparton to Robinvale their employer rang me saying how he was very disappointed in their productivity and was unsure of what to do. When it came out that they were working on a collective contract, I advised their employer to separate them and place them on individual contracts. Within days their productivity dramatically increased. This provides clear evidence that motivation and personal responsibility quickly dissipates when working as a collective, which in turn resulted in increased disputations and irresponsibility.

It is common knowledge that when people join a group they feel less responsible for their actions than they do when they are alone. This knowledge has been backed up by a considerable amount of research. Darley and Latane (1968) were among the first to describe how in groups, the pressure to perform does not focus on any particular participants, instead, the responsibility to perform is shared among all the participants and their sense of responsibility decreases in proportion to the size of the group. This process of diffusing responsibility has also been identified as a possible factor in a

number of other group phenomena, including deindividuation, social loafing, and moral disengagement (Forsyth, Zyzniewski & Giammanco, 2002). Social loafing has been defined as the tendency of individuals to exert less effort when working collectively than individually (Karau & Williams, 1993). Karau and Williams in their review of this behaviour found that it is strong across genders, cultures and tasks. However, the effects are stronger for men and persons from individualistic cultures. There are a number of theoretical explanations for this behaviour, they include:

Social Impact Theory

Latane, Williams and Harkins (1979) explain social loafing by the degree of social influence, which is a function of numbers, immediacy, and strength of the social influence as they relate to the task.

Arousal Reduction and Identifiability Theories

These theories suggest that the presence of others reduces arousal. Participants in collective conditions are not identifiable, thus their evaluation apprehension is minimal. Lower evaluation apprehension leads to lower arousal and may manifest itself in diminished productivity (Williams, Harkins and Latane, 1981).

Evaluation Potential

Harkin and Jackson (1985) argued that individuals engage in social loafing because, in collective conditions, they cannot obtain rewards or punishments for their output. Harkins and Szymanski (1988) found that the chance of comparing one's output with an objective criterion was sufficient in reducing social loafing.

The Collective Effort Model

Karau and Williams (1993) argue that the above theoretical explanations are too limited. Their Collective Effort Model asserts that individual performance is influenced by how the person perceives the connection between their effort and expected outcomes. Thus, individuals will engage in social loafing because they do not perceive a strong relationship between their effort and valued outcomes, which in collective conditions are split among all group members. Individuals will work harder in collective settings only if they perceive their effort to be instrumental in attaining personally valued outcomes. Individual effort leads to individual performance, which must influence group performance; group performance must lead to group outcomes that are valued by the individual, and group outcomes must relate to personally valued individual outcomes. Individual outcomes include salaries, self-assessment information, and feelings of belonging.

Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation

This theory incorporates the work of Schutz (1966) on human interpersonal behaviour. It is claimed that compatible groups outperform incompatible groups (Downs & Pickett, 1977). Compatible groups are those groups which satisfy one another's needs. These needs include feelings of belonging,

acceptance, significance, closeness, affection, dominance, dependability, competence and respect (Schutz, 1966).

A recent study by Forsyth, Zyzniewski & Giammanco (2002) examined certain questions about how responsibility is diffused in groups. Their results confirmed that diffusion of responsibility increased as the size of the group increased, reaching a maximum in eight-person groups. They also revealed that group members would often overrate their own personal performance, and that groups can identify certain members as more responsible than others and certain members that are less responsible than others. In addition, group members who perceive someone else to be the group leader would take less responsibility. Conversely, where no member was assigned to the position of group leader the diffusion of responsibility was less.

I find it amazing that there are a number of people who believe that all these facts do not, or ought not, apply to Aboriginal people. Not only do ordinary farmers, with little or no prior contact with Aboriginal people, subscribe to this way of thinking, it is also strong with Aboriginal welfare service providers and remote Aboriginal area community development workers. When I listen to these people talk, they appear to believe that rural and remote Aboriginal people are by nature simple people, yearning for the communal, contented to live in the haven of their own people, and therefore not wanting or unable to cope with modern expectations of work. This of course is nonsense. There is nothing unique about Aboriginal people yearning for the communal or the collective that prevents or prohibits them from working autonomously.

Many years ago, when I was about 14 years old, my father took me to a hippy commune in the Adelaide Hills. I think he was giving them some of his bee hives. This was my very first exposure to a group of people experimenting with different ways of living, through the development of small communal farms, based upon communistic ideals – I didn't quite understand what it was all about, but I was truly fascinated. This was the 'flower-power' era; the 'Age of Aquarius' was soon to arrive, and, unbeknown to me at the time, certain thoughts and feelings were being forged that were to form the foundation stones for the way in which I was to live the rest of my life (including the development of this scheme). Although I could never really grasp those pre-industrial, neo-primitive perspectives espoused by all these university hippy dropouts. I was just a simple working class kid who grew up on small, isolated, country railway siding spending most of my free time exploring the mallee scrub and trapping rabbits for pocket money. What I didn't know at the time was that this idea of trying to create economic self-sufficient 'utopian' communes in the 'wild', mostly by people unacquainted with agricultural/horticultural work, shared characteristics or parallels with monasticism, isolated religious fanatics, colonialism and early socialist experiments. The reasons why these communist-communalist experiments failed are many and varied, not the least of which was that such self-indulgent activities had a poor understanding of how real economies work. We were idealists (of various persuasions), yearning for the communal or the 'utopian' collective, and we were not Aboriginal.

Aboriginal people may be family oriented and prefer the company of their own people, as do communists, Amish, Sudanese, intellectuals, drug users, poets and young people generally. For example, surveys show that many young people prefer to be with a peer group of the same racial background. However, if they must choose between association with other young people of different races and adults of the same racial background, then age, rather than race, usually governs their choice (Berger, 1983). But what has this got to do with being excused from working individually? Nothing! Nor can I see how this preference to be with those in common has anything to do with an inability to cope with modern expectations of work.

I have heard employers and new Work Group Supervisors say that they have worked participants on a collective contract so that the good workers can role model for the poorer workers. This appears to make sense, but invariably it comes at the expense of a drop in the productivity of the better worker and only marginal increase in the productivity of the poorer worker. As the research suggests, and what has been proven time and time again, all workers should be responsible for the consequences of their good or poor performance. When a poor performer goes hungry or fails to earn enough money to satisfy his addiction to tobacco, this can have an amazing effect on his future work performance. Going on “strike” as happened in 1966 with an earlier version of this sort of work; people refusing to work unless they get money for nothing, will not solve their problem (see WPS Developmental Note #49). Instead, what they experience is an introduction to real work, and the real economy.

In Robinvale we have a different and interesting situation. For the last 6 months, up to 8 young participants have been working together on a lettuce farm for wages. Like any private sector employer, if any individual continually falls behind, they will lose their job. Their employer is operating a private farming enterprise for profit. He is not operating a government funded, or government subsidised, employment training program, or personal development program. So why then did **nobody** lose their job? The answer is simple – look at the research and consider the theories described above. When picking, they were required to keep up with a moving machine which objectified the work, like a production line. If any one person started slowing down it becomes obvious and everyone would have something uncomplimentary to say about it; including the owner-manager, driver, and other cutters and corers. Conversely, if the young ones did well they would be praised and given an adult wage. They work in close proximity to each other but they must all perform to a standard, and free loaders are not tolerated. This, combined with the fact that the members of this work group were young and chosen for their compatibility and tendency to follow rather than lead, enabled this group to conform to the expectations of their employer. The end result is that we have a **coactive** work environment where diffusion of responsibility is dramatically reduced.



A medical colleague of Theodore Dalrymple coined the phrase; “*Misery rises to meet the means available for its alleviation*”, meaning that poor behaviour will increase to the point where it’s forbidden. In this scheme, there is no sentiment for, or tolerance of, poor behaviour, which, in part, explains why few lose their job and productivity can be high. Although, I should add that all of us, if motivated and trained to do so, including my target group, have the capacity to govern ourselves for the greater good of self and society, without the necessity for an external director.

Berger, K.S. (1983). *The Developing Person Through the Life Span*. Worth Publishers, New York.

Darley, J., & Latane, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergence: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol.8, 377-383.

Forsyth, D. R., Zyzanski, L. E. & Giammanco, C. A. (2002). Responsibility Diffusion in Cooperative Collectives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol.28, No.1, 54-65.

Harkins, S. G., & Jackson, J. M. (1985). The role of evaluation in eliminating social loafing. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol.11, No.4, 457-465.

Harkins, S. G., & Szymanski, K. (1988). Social loafing and self-evaluation with an objective standard. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol.24, No.4, 354-365.

Karau, S. J., & Williams, K.D. (1993). Social Loafing: A meta-analytic review and theoretical integration. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol.45, No.4, 681-706.

Latane, B., Williams, K., & Harkins, S. (1979). Many hands make light the work: The causes and consequences of social loafing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol.37, No.6, 822-832.

Schutz, W. C. (1966). *The interpersonal underworld*. Palo Alto, CA: Science & Behaviour books.

Williams, K., Harkins, S. G., & Latane, B. (1981). Identifiability as a deterrent to social loafing: Two cheering experiments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol.40, No.2, 303-311.