

Advantages and disadvantages of working in groups



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Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of working collectively as opposed to individually. What can be done to enhance the pluses and reduce the minuses of working in groups?

It has been well documented that throughout the early part of homo-sapien evolution, humans were a deeply social animal (Richerson et al. 1998). This was mainly due to necessity; to 'work collectively' was to give oneself the edge over the stronger and faster species that inhabited earth, to choose isolation severely limited the chance of survival. In this essay, I will argue that despite the extreme changes to the environment, cultural norms and social expectancies, it is still the case today that the benefits of working as a group outweigh the drawbacks. In spite of this, I will also argue that much can still be done to enhance the positives and reduce the negatives of group work. This is mainly in order to counter-act innate human failings exposed by some of the negative effects of social influence.

Following studies conducted by Wallach et al., it has been argued that a major drawback to working collectively is the tendency of " unanimous group decisions...[to] show a shift toward greater risk taking when compared with pre-discussion individual decisions" (1962). This would suggest that when an objective, balanced decision might be necessary it is unlikely that posing such a problem to a group would provide an agreeable outcome. Where an individual assumes the sole weight of any negative consequence of their decision and is therefore made more cautious, the displacement of responsibility across a group lessens such a threat. Moreover, further research has added that not only do groups become riskier but a polarisation of opinions within the group leads to more extreme views (Fraser, 1971).

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Indeed, this has even been observed in a judicial context. On analysing the decisions of Federal district court judges sitting alone or in groups, it was found that when in a group of three, an extreme course of action was taken 65% of the time as opposed to 30% when decided on by a single judge (Main & Walker, 1973). Given that this is the case, a strong argument can be put forward for why it might be more beneficial for elected individuals to make ideologically motivated decisions if moderation is paramount. However, despite this, I contend that enough can be done to minimise the risk of unwanted polarisation to conclude its utility in important judicial, or other, decisions. It is probable that well-accustomed groups would be less likely to polarise their decisions as there would be no need by the individuals within the group to gravitate towards the socially accepted, majority view. This is backed by Fishkin and Luskin (1999) who also showed that a 'greater diversity' of people within a group offset much of the risk of polarisation. Therefore, although it is often posed that a drawback found in working collectively is a greater tendency towards riskier or extreme decisions, this can be easily compensated for with diverse and well-established groups; already typical characteristics looked for in groups.

Furthermore, diversity within groups provides the very basis for why working collectively is essential on tasks that require original thought or attentive discussion. It provides an opportunity for an individual to be challenged on their pre-conceived ideas/biases and to encounter a greater variety of opinions. This notion can even go as far as to argue that with the option of posing a problem to a group with slightly less capable members or a single highly capable individual, the former will normally provide the better

outcome. Cialdini supported this argument citing the example of the discovery of DNA; Watson and Crick's openness to ideas and working as part of a group rather than refusing help allowed them to surpass the efforts of the more intelligent Franklin (Cialdini, 2005). Where an individual's knowledge base is limited and their ability to see flaws in their own logic restricted, a group overcomes this with its access to different experiences, backgrounds and expertise. However, recent studies have tempered this view by suggesting that groups rarely outperform their best members (Bahrami, et al., 2010). It would seem that there is an argument to be made that there is a 'quantitative limit on the usefulness of cooperation' perhaps, as Bahrami found, due to the dissonance between the reliability of the individuals within the group and the communicated evidence. This theory adds to the notion of 'Groupthink' (Janis, 1972), that shows that under the wrong conditions, there are many drawbacks to working collectively and the 'reliability' of their communication is severely compromised. Janis argues that the determination of groups to be unanimous overrides the motivation to appraise alternatives; even with a diverse group, no benefit would be drawn from it. In spite of this and although this may be true, the hypothesis is contingent on poor conditions; situations that can be sufficiently counteracted. Groups that are persuaded to make a conscious effort to consider all information carefully and who consult with outsiders would be less likely to become an echo chamber for individual opinions to be validated. On top of this, the creation of sub-groups would negate the opportunity for conformity as a primary motive and would enhance the motivation of members to contribute. Therefore, given the right conditions,

the wealth and diversity of knowledge provided by a group vastly outweighs even an extremely competent individual.

However, this entire discussion is dependent on whether or not the presence of others makes an individual work harder or alternatively contribute less; for even with all the benefits of working collectively, it lacks any utility if group productivity is found to be lower than an individuals. Latané et al. (1981) argued that 'social loafing' occurred within groups whereby individuals would work less hard due to the belief that their contributions were less significant. Nevertheless, following a meta-analysis of this theory (Karau and Williams, 1993), key reasons for this tendency were identified thus allowing for methods to reduce such negatives of collective work to be formulated. It was found that the main reason for the reduced work effort was often due to the lack of identifiability. Given this is the case, measures such as smaller group sizes and individual progress reports would seem to be the solution and would enhance the motivation of individuals within the group.

Furthermore, an opposing theory, Allport's theory of 'social facilitation' (1924), lends weight to the fact that not only can social loafing be compensated for but in fact the presence of others could actually boost the productivity of an individual. This could be, as Triplett (1898) suggests, due to a competitive element being introduced. Consequently, it seems that the promotion of competitive desires whilst also maintaining group cohesion is key to enhancing the positives of working collectively. This could be achieved by having an attentive supervisor monitor any collective work and requiring a uniform to be worn by all the group members. Therefore, despite the presence of opposing theories on whether or not working collectively

increases or decreases productivity, enough can be done to enhance the motivation to contribute in group members so as to assure a greater output than that of an individual.

In conclusion, it appears that the benefits of working collectively outweigh the drawbacks but that in order for that to be the case certain conditions need to be in place to reduce the negatives and enhance the positives. Working collectively allows for greater productivity, variation of ideas and, despite prior research, lesser chance of extreme views. However, consistent amongst most studies is the need for sub-groups, diversity within the members and a cohesive, well-established team for the benefits to apply.

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