

Team Work Swallows up Strong and Weak

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Problem Solving May 25, 2005

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Dear Susan:

Although I am a so-called knowledge worker, I feel like I work in a factory. I write reports that sometimes get used somewhere up the pipeline, sometimes get scrapped and sometimes get shelved indefinitely. Because I am a member of a team my name doesn't even go on them. My team members also feel anonymous and do the absolute minimum, figuring no one will notice. So I end up carrying the weight but not getting the credit, except as a member of the team. I'm losing motivation and wonder how to draw attention to myself without drawing attention to them.

The Chump

Dear Chump:

Your workplace is like a hydra – all body and tentacles, no head. A lake dweller that looks like a feather duster but acts like a jellyfish, a hydra shoots out a tiny barb that holds its prey down while its body “envelopes the organism like a sock being pulled over a foot” according to one nature website. This one inch creature manages just fine without a brain, mainly by shifting with the current and consuming whatever floats by.

It's hardly a strategy, but that pretty much sums up the M.O of most teamwork. Unless a team brings together diverse talents and allows each member to get credit for their individual contributions, most teams swallow up the strong and weak players equally, spitting out the same undifferentiated product. If something's gone right there might be a collective reward – if there is one at all -- and if something goes wrong, there's always a fall guy.

That you feel demoralized is understandable; it's common among the more competent members of the team, who end up shouldering the free-riders. Unless you're prepared to defect you have no choice but to speak to your manager or better yet, a confederate about what motivates you. Instead of drawing attention to your team members, tell this confederate how you work best: when there's a taut link between your work and the outcome. Ask for a project or a piece of one that you can own. If that's not possible within your own division, investigate whether a different approach is employed elsewhere. Then request a lateral move.

But be careful how you couch your dissatisfaction. Not-a-team-player is the ultimate diss in our collectively oriented workplaces; it's an all purpose smear that covers any collective sin. That's a shame. Individualists would garner more respect if the research on attitudes to teamwork were better known. Several large scale American

studies have shown that team members with the strongest abilities prefer recognition based on their own performance. The weaker ones prefer team-based rewards, of course. These free-riders are a given when there's one set of objectives and a single reward: the group's. That makes perfect sense for a tiny worm with tentacles but no head and no brain. An organism with some executive function should aim a bit higher.

Dear Susan:

I am a recent science graduate with a summer job in a university research lab. The hours are terrible, the pay is not great but the work is interesting and it could lead to graduate school eventually. Recently several members of the lab were recruited to a pharmaceutical company where there is a project going on in a similar area. I am tempted to join them because this job is temporary and the pay there is much better. Please advise.

A Floundering Female

Dear Floundering:

Stay put for now. Once you leave school and enter the workforce, returning to the classroom can feel like a trip to Mars. This is especially true for women, who are half as likely as men to go into science in the first place, and then are 10 percent less likely to stay in it, according to research done by sociologists Yu Xie and Kimberlee Shauman at University of California at Davis. Not that it's your job to even out the numbers by being a token. But if you're interested in earning more not just now but in the long run, staying in or close to the academic track can pay off in a big way. Just last week Statistics Canada released a report by University of Toronto economics professor Philip Oreopoulos showing that every extra year of high school a person attended in Canada resulted in a 12 percent increase in his or her income annually. Prof. Oreopoulos was leery about extending this kind of prediction to graduate work – economists are fussy that way -- but he did point me to the work of his colleague, Thomas Lemieux, an economics professor at the University of British Columbia who looked at how WWII veterans fared who pursued higher education on a Canadian version of the GI Bill. “Essentially what we found was that veterans who were able to go to university had 10 to 15 percent of extra earnings for each year of education,” said Prof. Lemieux. More recent data confirm that this trend still holds. People with graduate degrees earn proportionally more than those with bachelors degrees, according to the 2001 census data. But even more important than money is the kind of job you'll ultimately have with an undergraduate degree in science. If you like research and stick with it you can be a queen bee but if you go to work now you'll always be a drone.

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