

Speedbump #35: Excessive Teamwork

Back in the 1890s, French researcher Max Ringelmann discovered what others later called the Ringelmann effect:ⁱ the larger a workgroup, the more likely workers will waste time rather than get their work done. Not only do they socialize more, they also expect others to pick up the slack. This remains true today: small workgroups tend to produce more per person than larger ones.

Think about the groupthink we discussed before. When one person is aggressive or threatening, everyone may agree with them just so they can stay on the alpha member's good side and get along. This inevitably damages productivity as ideas and innovation go stale.

So when is teamwork counterproductive?

1. **When groups are too large.** Many entrepreneurs have taken Ringelmann's research to heart, including Jeff Bezos of Amazon. According to his "Two-Pizza Rule,"ⁱⁱ a team or meeting should contain no more people than it would take to feed with two large pizzas. Bezos sets the number at 5 to 8. Why so few? Partially because the more people and communication involved, the greater the likelihood for confusion.
2. **When teamwork isn't required.** Indeed, some have challenged the entire assumption that teamwork is inherently productive.ⁱⁱⁱ Researchers Natalie Allen and Tracy Hecht (a psychologist and management professor, respectively) claim there's little research to prove it – that we accept it as real because it makes sense, just as many of us still believe failure inevitably precedes entrepreneurial success.^{iv} Among other things, Allen and Hecht claim we often force teamwork on projects and people who don't need it.
3. **When multiple alternatives are needed.** Consider brainstorming. Contrary to expectations, it seems to work best when you do it in private and then compare your ideas with the rest of the team's ideas. In group settings, introverts are less likely to speak up, while extroverts may take over the whole session.
4. **When one person is already the expert.** A Director of Finance I worked with used to send out a weekly spreadsheet to the ten members of the executive leadership team. They all dutifully tried to analyze it, make sense of it, and determine how it impacted their strategy. He thought he was being efficient by shooting it out to this large group on a regular basis, on schedule. However, a collective five hours was invested by this team of high-paid professionals to review it. In a FAST team culture, the Director would have asked himself, "What can *I* to make my team go FAST?"

In the end, who cares that you made a spreadsheet? What does it MEAN? Instead of creating a spreadsheet, sending it out, and thinking, “They’re smart enough to figure it out themselves,” the Director would have thought, “I’m the expert on this topic, so I’ll spend an additional 20 minutes writing a narrative and explaining what this data means. I’ll tell them what they should be watching for, provide some trend data, and compare it to last quarter. That way, they can spend their time brainstorming what it means to the company and be prepared to discuss actions in their meeting on Monday.”

If you’re the expert on the team, act like the expert! Proactively give your team members help and assume they don’t know. You’ll save yourself time in the end, because you won’t receive 20 emails with 20 questions, and the actual meeting will be far more productive and less frustrating for you. When you have a FAST culture, your team members will do the same for you.

Always take into account your individual capacities for productivity, creativity, and innovation. So while teamwork rules, it doesn’t rule all. Know when to put it aside for the moment and be the expert, so you can help the non-experts go faster.

ⁱ Kravitz, D. A. and Martin, B. (1986). “Ringelmann Rediscovered: The Original Article,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 50, 936-941.

ⁱⁱ Adkins, “Majority of U.S. Employees Not Engaged.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Allen, N. J. and Hecht, T. D. (2004). “The ‘Romance of Teams’: Toward an Understanding of Its Psychological Underpinnings and Implications.” *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77: 439-461. doi: 10.1348/0963179042596469.

^{iv} Gompers, Paul A., Josh Lerner, David Scharfstein, and Anna Kovner (2010). “Performance Persistence in Entrepreneurship.” *Journal of Financial Economics* 96: 18-32.