

FEUDS IN STUDENT GROUPS: COPING WITH WHINERS, MARTYRS, SABOTEURS, BULLIES, AND DEADBEATS

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Freud (1959) was right about human groups: they bring out the best and the worst of the species. At best, groups are superior to individuals because they can accomplish more work, are more creative, have more information, and offer more pleasure through the process of task accomplishment. At worst, groups waste time insidiously, accomplish little work, and create an arena in which interpersonal conflict can rage.

We focus here on conflict within student groups. Group projects are used frequently in the organizational behavior classes that we teach at Stanford's Department of Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management. To illustrate, student groups in our undergraduate organizational behavior class write a case description of a local company. Other groups in a Masters level class ("Organizational Transitions") recently studied the use of blame and secrecy in bankrupt Silicon Valley firms. Our (sometimes unpleasant) experiences with such groups have forced us to learn about conflict development in student groups and to devise strategies for handling such feuds.

A trio of structural aspects set the stage for feuds in student groups: interdependence, reward systems, and the mix of educational backgrounds and demographic characteristics among students. The enhanced interdependence of group tasks (in comparison to individual tasks) creates a setting in which conflict can take place. Students working on a group project often have diverse and opposing ideas about the best way to approach the assignment. As Pfeffer and Salancik write, "Interdependence is the reason why nothing comes out quite the way one wants it to" (1978, p. 40). The strain of such interdependence is evident when students are conducting field research. One member may be responsible for obtaining contacts with, say, a business, while another may be responsible for obtaining interviews with members of that business. The pressure of interdependence is also evident when students must contribute to the production of a single essay. The performance of one student may have little bearing on the grade he or she receives if others do not have sufficient skill or involvement. Students sometimes complain, "I would have done better by myself than I did with this group."

The reward system instituted by the teacher can also lead to conflict among students. Students work hard to discover how grades are allocated and they are keenly perceptive about how the cookies are divided. Students

focus their efforts elsewhere when they learn that group performance has little influence on their grade. Further, members of a group may vary in how much they believe group work is rewarded. Such perceptions can lead (initially) to inequitable effort and (later) to feuding. A student of dubious initiative, or one who has more pressing concerns in other classes, may not carry-out his or her responsibilities to the group. The group's grade may suffer, or feelings of inequity may arise.

Finally, we have found that the composition of a student team can generate conflict among members. A group composed of males and females and students of various ethnic, religious, and academic backgrounds may use such diversity to its advantage. To illustrate, imagine that a group composed of a sociology major, an engineering major, and an English major is writing a case study about a high technology firm. A superior case could be written if the sociology major contributes special knowledge about the organization's structure, the engineer helps the other members understand the software program produced by the firm, and the English major carefully edits the final report.

Unfortunately, groups composed of members with diverse backgrounds can feud so much that it interferes with performance. In one of our classes, a group included a female Masters student in engineering, a male undergraduate in engineering, and two female liberal arts majors. They fought constantly. After the group's paper had been turned in, the male engineering undergraduate tried to convince Sutton to allow him to repair the "errors" made by the Masters student. He complained, "She thinks she can push me around just because she's a graduate student."

Whiners, Martyrs, Saboteurs, Bullies, and Deadbeats

Interdependence creates an arena in which students with different perspectives and a common assignment may fight. The reward system employed by the instructor may enhance the conflict if cooperative effort is not sufficiently rewarded. Students with diverse backgrounds may also feud because of differences in world view and language. Nevertheless, as teachers, we rarely hear about such structural factors from feuding students. Rather, we hear complaints about troublesome individuals.

We have noticed that such troublesome characters fall into distinguishable categories. We have identified five "types" of students that are associated with conflict in student groups. We are not attributing fault to these people, but we have observed that conflict tends to be more common in groups that don't manage them well. The characters we have identified are The Whiner, The Martyr, The Saboteur, The Bully, and The Deadbeat. After describing the attributes of each of these characters, we will suggest methods for managing them.

The Whiner. The group project is one hassle after another for The Whiner. The Whiner feels that the group meets on the most inconvenient day and time, the paper is turning out to be too long, and nobody else is contributing as much to the project. The Whiner can't see how the project will be any good or be done on time. Our experience suggests that this person was snake bitten during prior group projects, and is resigned to the inevitable failure and anti-intellectualism of group endeavors. The focus of

the group may become diverted from the project to mollifying The Whiner. Such activity can often lead to an inordinate weighting of The Whiner's input at the expense of more valuable, but less vociferous, contributions by others in the group. Moreover, the unnecessary anxiety of approaching a group meeting containing The Whiner can be unpleasant, lead to fewer meetings than might be necessary and hamper the effectiveness in meetings that are held.

The Martyr. The Martyr is certain that he or she is getting the worst assignment, the worst chores to perform and has the dumbest partners for group members. The Martyr may complain to other group members, or to the instructor, about the burden. Yet, in contrast to The Whiner, The Martyr doesn't seem to want anything to change; he or she just wants others to feel guilty. The Martyr tells the other group members, "It's O.K., go skiing, I don't mind doing the paper."

One martyr who Sutton spoke with said that she had done 75 percent of the work on a group paper. The student didn't want any change in her grade or the grade of other group members; she just wanted Sutton to appreciate her burden. The Martyr can create conflict in a variety of ways; members may tire of the constant complaining or they may spend too much time trying to appease The Martyr. In one group we know of, the members simply scheduled meetings without The Martyr.

The Saboteur. In contrast to The Martyr and The Whiner, The Saboteur takes an active role in the disruption of the group. Such disruption is often unintentional; the student may only be trying to enhance the quality of the group's work. The Saboteur's trademark is that these "enhancements" are implemented without the knowledge of the other group members. Unfortunately for the group, the altered work may be of lower quality than the original. In one of our classes, for example, a student had the task of typing the group's report. All group members had agreed that no other work was needed on the manuscript. The typist turned Saboteur: he changed the manuscript drastically and these "improvements" damaged the quality of the paper. A nasty fight took place between The Saboteur and the other group members after the changes had been discovered. A second feud broke out after the paper received a poor grade.

The Bully. This character also takes an active role in the disruption of the group, but unlike The Saboteur, The Bully isn't shy about letting the group know how things should be done. The Bully's special talent is making others in the group feel inadequate or dumb. This problem is accentuated if The Bully is either brighter or better prepared than the others in the group. If the superior ability of The Bully is clear to the other members, they may be unwilling to contribute anything to the project. Alternately, a backlash may develop within the group; other members may choose to ignore The Bully or argue with everything The Bully says. In an extreme case we encountered, two members of a group ganged up on the remaining two members. The two Bullies withheld critical project-related material and excluded the outcasts from their secret meetings. Phone calls by the two victims were not returned and appointments were ignored. The Bullies thought they could do better work without the victims, and only included the outcasts in the final stages of the project.

A variation on "The Bully" is the "The Lazy Bully." The Lazy Bully plays no active role in the group until some critical decision must be made. At this juncture, The Lazy Bully tries to force his or her will on the other members of the group. This character is disruptive because co-workers resent The Lazy Bully's newfound interest in the group task. Concerns are expressed such as, "Where were you during the last five meetings?" The potential for backlash against The Lazy Bully is more pronounced here than for The Bully. The Lazy Bully lacks even the pretense of having contributed to the group.

The Deadbeat. The Whiner, The Martyr, The Saboteur, and The Bully each take actions that disrupt the group. The Deadbeat doesn't necessarily disrupt anything. Yet The Deadbeat can evoke feuds when other group members refuse to carry an unproductive member. Members may decide that "something must be done" about The Deadbeat, and spend an inordinate amount of time deciding how to cope with their idle coworker. They may even spend time fighting with The Deadbeat. During the beginning weeks of one class, we had a group that could not locate a member. We told the group members to do their work without him. The missing member approached Jalajas on the day the first project was due and said that he didn't know a group project had been assigned. This identified him as a Deadbeat. The group was plagued by The Deadbeat throughout the term. The group found themselves rescheduling meetings in an attempt to accommodate him, and bad feelings among the group members arose.

Coping With Troublesome Characters

The Whiner, Martyr, Saboteur, Bully, and Deadbeat are described above as if they are fully developed "personality types." Under the right set of circumstances, however, the majority of the students in our classes would probably behave in ways that would be typical of one or more of these troublesome characters. Thus, in our opinion, we should do all we can to create conditions that discourage the emergence of these troublesome characters and minimize the extent to which they have a negative impact on their groups when they do appear.

Some of the most helpful ideas for minimizing the negative impact of feuds in student groups that we have identified to date are summarized in Table 1. These include both preventive and corrective strategies and alternatives that are available to students as well as instructors.

Preventive strategies available to teachers. The techniques listed in this portion of the table can help the teacher reduce the potential for feuds. First, teachers can structure the rewards for group assignments so that students are more likely to cooperate with each other and to work hard. The emergence of Martyrs and Deadbeats will be discouraged if all students believe that the group assignment has a strong influence on the final grade. Thus, teachers should ensure that each group assignment constitutes a significant portion of the final grade. We recommend, for example, that group papers constitute at least 20 percent of the course grade.

One hazard of group projects is that no single person is responsible for the completion of the task; each member may expect the others to carry the

TABLE 1
Coping Strategies for Conflicts in Student Groups

	Available to Teachers	Available to Students
Preventive Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop an appropriate reward system 2. Address the issue of teacher-vs. student-assigned groups 3. Remind students of three "truths" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make the division of responsibilities clear 2. Don't blindly accept problems 3. Don't take responsibility for happiness of others
Corrective Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss the problem with group members 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reopen discussions about responsibilities 2. Confront the troublesome character 3. Reduce contact with the character 4. Don't let the Saboteur be responsible for editing or typing papers 5. Do all editing and typing together

load. The rewards allocated for group projects can be used to stem diffusion of responsibility among group members. We have found that a useful method for reducing conflict is to build in some sort of accountability for individual students. This minimizes the possibility that students who wish to "coast" through the project have the opportunity to do so. A professor in our department addresses this problem by requiring that members of a group indicate on the first page of the paper the percentage of effort contributed by each member to the final project.

Teachers should also be aware that the composition of the student groups may also be a potential source of conflict. As we mentioned earlier, groups that are composed of diverse members are more likely to feud. Yet a dilemma arises; although heterogeneous groups are more susceptible to conflict, the complementary skills of their members are likely to lead to high performance. Our experience suggests that if students form their own groups, then homogeneity is often so high that it interferes with performance. We have noticed, for example, that in classes where students are asked to form groups, students whose first language is not English will tend to form groups with those of a similar nationality. They appear to seek the comfort, security, and convenience of others who speak the same language. This is a common problem in Stanford's Engineering School. In one case, we observed a group of Japanese nationals who formed their own group and seemed to enjoy the experience. Unfortunately, when members of this group interviewed outsiders (who only spoke English), the language barrier prevented them from writing a high quality report. Although conflict in such groups may be lower, performance may also be lower when a group lacks members with key skills.

Although the case of the Japanese nationals is an extreme example, we have encountered similar problems in other homogenous groups such as those composed of students who are all members of the same fraternity. As a result, despite the potential for greater conflict, we usually place students in heterogenous groups that we have designed. Typically, we seek to assemble groups that are composed of both men and women, and that have members who are majoring in a variety of subjects. We suggest, however, that heterogenous groups only be used if steps are taken to manage the enhanced conflict. One strategy that we use allows for a longer "storming" stage in the development of such groups (see Tuckman, 1965). We give student groups at least two assignments. The first is a simple exercise that accounts for only five percent of the course grade. We warn students, however, that they will work with the same groups on a subsequent assignment that constitutes 30 percent of the course grade. We suggest that students use the initial assignment to develop norms and a role structure so that they can reach Tuckman's "performing" stage by the time that they must write the major paper.

The final strategy sets the stage for preventive strategies available to students. We contend that teachers should take an active role in making a few "truths" known to their students. In other words, teachers can give students a few "tips" about actions that can be taken to stem the emergence of troublesome characters. Some of these insights may seem obvious, but our experience reveals that the obvious may evaporate in the heat of the semester.

Preventive strategies available to students. We remind students of three "truths" at the outset of each group assignment (see Table 1). Our first suggestion is to remind students to make the division of responsibilities explicit. Students should decide in advance who will type the final draft, which areas of the project will be covered by whom and who will drive to off-campus sites. They should also decide when and where meetings will be held, who will be responsible for editing drafts and how much latitude each member should have in making changes. Clear distribution of responsibility will give The Whiner less to whine about and provide The Martyr with less cause to claim martyrdom. Furthermore, if the distribution of tasks is done with skill, The Saboteur may have less reason (or less opportunity) for altering the work of others and The Bully may have a few less topics to be a bully about. Research has shown that commitments that are made in public (the group, in this case) are more difficult to revoke (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Hence, after stating their responsibilities, members of the group will be more likely to comply with their assignments and members who don't perform as promised (e.g., Deadbeats) can be easily identified.

A second suggestion is to encourage students not to accept blindly the problems that they find in their groups. If a student doesn't approve of a decision or a procedure proposed by another in the group, that person has an obligation to say so. Such encouragement may reduce the disruptive opportunities available to The Whiner and The Martyr. Although this gives The Whiner license to complain, the complaints are often more constructive and incite thought rather than rattle nerves. Also, when The Bully is a problem, the other members are encouraged not to let him or her run roughshod over them. In addition, we encourage students to get further advice about their problem if conflicts escalate beyond the point they can be handled within the group.

Our third suggestion is to explain to the students that, individually, they are not responsible for the happiness of the other members of their group. They are responsible for behaving ethically and for treating other group members with respect, but the purpose of the group is not to develop lifelong friendships. We have found that members of groups often form social groups that last beyond the due date of the group project. This is great. Yet, when a group is experiencing high levels of conflict, the desire not to hurt feelings only compounds the pressure already on the group from their project-related problems. We have encountered many cases in which students have told us that they have not suggested alternatives to the ideas presented in group discussions for fear of stepping on another group member's toes.

We suspect that The Bully, The Saboteur, and The Deadbeat are aware of the norms for peaceful coexistence and are able to play off of these norms to their benefit. The Whiner and The Martyr, on the other hand, are able to avoid confrontations with other students by evoking feelings of sympathy or pity. Members of groups with these troublesome characters, however, must not be shy about asking them to contribute their fair share of effort.

Corrective strategies available to instructors. When a feud has already occurred, the teacher may be able to help the students repair the problem. A modest level of conflict within a group is desirable because it prevents the

dangerous unanimity of opinion associated with groupthink (Janis, 1982). The heightened emotions also may inspire members to develop better ideas. Concern by the teacher, however, is justified when conflict within a group has become upsetting to some members. One reliable indicator of destructive conflict is when a student approaches a teacher about a feud in his or her group. At this stage a teacher has the option of using two problem solving styles. The first style is an advisory role; the teacher acts more like a counselor than a boss. The suggestions a teacher may provide in this situation are listed under the heading of "Corrective strategies available to students." The second style is a more authoritarian stance. There are, however, many dilemmas associated with the use of authority in the classroom (see Berg, 1984). We suggest that the instructor behave this way in only the most extreme cases of discord.

The corrective technique we have found most useful in reducing the negative impact of conflict within groups is meeting with the entire group and helping them to clarify the problem. We generally encourage students to solve problems of conflict among themselves. Occasionally, however, we have also had private talks with the disruptive member of the group. Such a conversation typically helps to clarify the cause of the conflict and makes it clear to the student that he or she needs to reevaluate the seriousness of the problem.

Corrective strategies available to students. Once the projects have begun, students are in a far better position than the instructor to correct problems that arise, and they should be aware of the strategies they can use to cope with troublesome characters (see Table 1). One of the most promising ways to handle The Whiner or The Martyr is to reopen discussions about the responsibilities of group members. Another, and somewhat stronger, approach is for distraught group members to confront the offending member with their concerns. If these measures prove to be inadequate, students can attenuate The Bully's influence by reducing the amount of contact with that person. For example, one group we know of was having a problem with a Bully during their meetings. The other group members discovered that The Bully worked a part-time job on campus and surreptitiously constructed The Bully's schedule. The group then scheduled meetings at those times when The Bully was working. We should emphasize, however, that this technique should only be used when all other attempts at reasoning with The Bully have failed, since it generally results in hard feelings and doesn't really solve the problem.

In dealing with a Saboteur, making responsibilities of group members clear and confronting The Saboteur as early as possible, usually solves the problem. In addition, students can reduce opportunities for sabotage by structuring responsibilities so that this character has less opportunity to change the work of others. One obvious example is to not let a Saboteur be responsible for editing or typing group papers. Another solution is for the group to do all the editing and typing together.

Conclusions

Structural characteristics of student projects often give rise to the

emergence of five troublesome characters: Whiners, Martyrs, Saboteurs, Bullies, and Deadbeats. These people can cause conflict and endanger the effectiveness of student work groups. Although extreme conflict is destructive, the groupthink literature suggests that moderate conflict is a characteristic of high-performing groups. We maintain that we can and should design our projects so that enough conflict will emerge to push our students to make the most of their collective talents. In addition, we should take steps to insure that the conflict does not escalate to the point that it destroys students' learning opportunities. As a result, we have suggested a number of measures that are effective in preventing or controlling the troublesome characters that could otherwise compromise the value of student project teams.

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