

## Coping with Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams

You will usually find your teammates as interested in learning as you are. Occasionally, however, you may encounter a person who creates difficulties. This handout is meant to give you practical advice for this type of situation.

To begin with, let's imagine you have been assigned to a combined homework and lab group this semester with three other people: Mary, Henry, and Jack. Mary is okay—she's not good at solving problems, but she tries hard, and she willingly does things like get extra help from the professor. Henry is irritating. He's a nice guy, but he just doesn't put in the effort to do a good job. He'll sheepishly hand over partially finished homework problems and confess to spending the weekend watching TV. Jack, on the other hand, has been nothing but a problem. Here are a few of the things Jack has done:

- When you tried to set up meetings at the beginning of the semester, Jack just couldn't meet, because he was too busy.
- Jack rarely turns in his part of the homework. When he does, it's almost always wrong. He obviously spent just enough time to scribble something down that looks like work.
- Jack has never answered phone messages. When you confront him, he denies getting any messages. When you email him, he's too busy to answer.
- Jack misses every meeting—he always promises that he'll be there, but never shows up.
- His writing skills are okay, but he can't seem to do anything right for lab reports. He loses the drafts, doesn't reread his work, leaves out tables, or does something sloppy like write equations by hand. You've stopped assigning him work because you don't want to miss your professor's strict deadlines.
- Jack constantly complains about his fifty-hour work weeks, heavy school load, bad textbooks, and terrible teachers. At first you felt sorry for him—but recently you've begun to wonder if Jack is using you.
- Jack speaks loudly and self-confidently when you try to discuss his problems. He thinks the problems are everyone else's fault. He is so self-assured that you can't help but wonder if he's right.

Your group finally became so upset that you went to discuss the situation with Teacher Distracted. She in turn talked, along with the group, to Jack, who in sincere and convincing fashion said he hadn't really understood what everyone wanted him to do. Dr. Distracted said the problem must be that the group was not communicating effectively. She noticed you, Mary, and Henry looked angry and agitated, while Jack simply looked bewildered, a little hurt, and not at all guilty. It was easy for Dr. Distracted to conclude this was a dysfunctional group, and everyone was at fault, probably Jack least of all.

The bottom line: You and your teammates are left holding the bag. Jack is getting the same good grades as everyone else without doing any work. And he managed to make you all look bad while he was at it.

### What this group did wrong: Absorbing

This was an 'absorber' group. From the very beginning they absorbed the problem when Jack did something wrong and took pride in getting the job done whatever the cost. Hitchhikers count on you to act in a self-sacrificing manner. However, the nicer you are (or the nicer you think you are being), the more the hitchhiker will be able to hitchhike their way through the university and through life. By absorbing the hitchhiker's problems, you are inadvertently training the hitchhiker to become the kind of person who thinks it is all right to take credit for the work of others.

### What this group should have done: Mirroring

It's important to reflect the dysfunctional behavior of the hitchhiker back at the hitchhiker, so the hitchhiker pays the price, and not you. Never accept accusations, blame, or criticism from a hitchhiker. Maintain your own sense of reality despite what the hitchhiker says, which is easier said than done. Show them you have a bottom line: there are limits to the behavior you will accept. Clearly communicate these limits and act consistently on them. For example, here is what the group could have done:

- When Jack couldn't find time to meet in his busy schedule, even when alternatives were suggested, you needed to decide whether Jack was a hitchhiker. Was Jack brusque, self-important, and in a hurry to get away? Those are suspicious signs. Someone needed to tell Jack up front to either find time to meet or talk to the teacher.
- If Jack turns nothing in, his name does not go on the finished work. (Note: if you know your teammate is generally a contributor, it is appropriate to help if something unexpected arises.) Many teachers allow a team to fire a student, so the would-be freeloader must work alone the rest of the semester. Discuss this option with your teacher if the student has not contributed over the course of an assignment or two.
- If Jack turns in poorly prepared homework or lab reports, you must tell him he has not contributed meaningfully, so his name will not go on the submitted work. No matter what Jack says, stick to your guns! If Jack gets abusive, show the professor his work. Do this the first time the junk is submitted, before Jack has taken too much advantage and not after a month, when you are really getting frustrated.
- Set your limits early and high, because hitchhikers have an uncanny ability to detect just how much they can get away with.
- If Jack doesn't respond to emails, answer phone messages, or show up for meetings, don't waste more time trying to contact him. (It can be helpful, particularly in industry, to use email for contacting purposes, because then a written record is available about the contact attempt. Copying the email to Jack's supervisor or other important people can often produce surprisingly effective results.)
- Keep in mind that the only one who can handle Jack's problems is Jack. You can't change him. You can only change your own attitude, so he no longer takes advantage of you. Only Jack can change Jack and he will have no incentive to change if you do all his work for him.

People like Jack can be skilled manipulators. By the time you find out his problems are never-ending, and he himself is the cause, the semester has ended, and he is off to repeat his manipulations on a new, unsuspecting group. Stop allowing these dysfunctional patterns early in the game before the hitchhiker takes advantage of you and the rest of your team!

### Henry, the Couch Potato

But we haven't discussed Henry yet. Although Henry stood up with the rest of the group to try to battle against Jack's irrational behavior, he hasn't really been pulling his weight. (If you think of yourself as tired and bored and more interested in watching TV than working on your homework-everyone has had times like these-you begin to get a picture of the couch potato.)

You will find the best way to deal with a couch potato like Henry is the way you deal with a hitchhiker: set firm, explicit expectations and then stick to your guns. Although couch potatoes are not as manipulative as hitchhikers, they will definitely test your limits. If your limits are weak, you then share the blame if you have Henry's work to do as well as your own.

### But I've Never Liked Telling People What to Do!

If you are a nice person who has always avoided confrontation, working with a couch potato or a hitchhiker can help you grow as a person and learn the important character trait of firmness. Just be patient with yourself as you learn. The first few times you try to be firm, you may find yourself thinking, 'but now they won't like me-it's not worth the pain!' But many people just like you have had the same troubled reaction the first few (or even many) times they tried to be firm. Just keep trying and stick to your guns! One day, it will seem more natural, and you won't feel so guilty about having reasonable expectations for others. In the meantime, you will find you have more time to spend with your family, friends, or schoolwork, because you aren't doing someone else's job along with your own.

### Common Characteristics that Allow a Hitchhiker to Take Advantage

- Unwillingness to allow a slacker to fail and subsequently learn from their own mistakes.
- Devotion to the ideal of 'the good of the team'— without common sense realization of how this can allow others to take advantage of you. Sometimes you show (and are secretly proud of) irrational loyalty to others.
- You like to make others happy even at your own expense.
- You always feel you must do better—your best is never enough.
- Your willingness to interpret the slightest contribution by a slacker as 'progress.'
- You are willing to make personal sacrifices to not abandon a hitchhiker without realizing you are devaluing yourself in this process.
- Long-suffering martyrdom-nobody but you could stand this.
- The ability to cooperate but not delegate.
- Excessive conscientiousness.

- The tendency to feel responsible for others at the expense of being responsible for yourself.

A related circumstance: you're doing all the work

As soon as you become aware everyone is leaving the work to you—or doing such poor work that you are left doing it all, you need to act. Many teachers allow you the leeway to request a move to another team. (You cannot move to another group on your own.) Your teacher will probably ask some questions before taking the appropriate action.

Later out on the job and in your personal life

You will meet couch potatoes and hitchhikers throughout the course of your professional career. Couch potatoes are relatively benign, can often be firmly guided to do reasonably good work, and can even become your friends. However, hitchhikers are completely different people: ones who can work their way into your confidence and then destroy it. (Hitchhikers may infrequently try to befriend you and cooperate once you've gained their respect because they can't manipulate you. Just because they've changed their behavior towards you, however, doesn't mean they won't continue to do the same thing to others.) Occasionally, a colleague, subordinate, supervisor, friend, or acquaintance can be a hitchhiker. If this is the case, and your personal or professional life is being affected, it will help if you keep in mind the techniques suggested above.

EVALUATION OF PROGRESS TOWARD EFFECTIVE TEAM FUNCTIONING

Your Team Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Symptoms of Internal Meeting Problems		Usually	Sometimes	Hardly Ever
1	Team meetings generally begin 5-15 minutes late.			
2	Members often arrive late, leave early, or never show up for the meetings.			
3	No agenda exists—members simply have a vague notion of what they want to accomplish.			
4	One or two members monopolize discussion throughout the meeting.			
5	Members have not read the assignment, performed the necessary background research, or done what they were expected to do. Consequently, individuals are poorly prepared for the meeting.			
6	With words or through body language, some members clearly convey that they would rather be elsewhere.			
7	Members constantly interrupt each other or talk in pairs without listening to the individual who has the floor.			
8	Issues never get resolved, only put on the back burner until next time.			
9	No follow-up action plan is developed. Members are confused about what the next step is and who is responsible for performing it.			
10	The same individual or individuals end up doing most of the work. The meetings run on and on with little to show for the time spent on them.			
11	Assignments are not completed on time or are completed poorly.			

**Sample Team Contract (max. 2 pages)**

Team name: \_\_\_\_\_

GOALS: What are our team goals for this project?  
What do we want to accomplish? What skills do we want to develop or refine?

EXPECTATIONS: What do we expect of one another regarding attendance at meetings, participation, frequency of communication, the quality of work, etc.?

ROLES: How will tasks be distributed for each assignment/lab? Please list roles and responsibilities, and how these will be rotated.

Example (erase if needed)

*Coordinator: organizes work sessions, communicates meeting times/place, and tasks, keeps everyone on task, makes sure everyone is involved during meetings.*

*Recorder: prepares final solution to be turned in. Records ideas (or lab measurements), notes during meetings.*

*Monitor: ensures that all team members understand and agree with the solution/report/poster.*

*Checker: verifies and submits the final solution.*

*Roles will be rotated for each assignment. For laboratories, the coordinator will assign manual tasks. The recorder will write down measurements. Other roles remain the same.*

POLICIES & PROCEDURES: What rules can we agree on to help us meet our goals and expectations?

CONSEQUENCES: How will we address non-performance regarding these goals, expectations, policies and procedures?
OTHER: Write any other pertinent contractual information that has not yet been discussed.

Signatures:

### TEAM MEMBER EVALUATION FORM

Name of student being evaluated: \_\_\_\_\_

The following evaluation of your team members is a tool to help improve your experience with group work. Its purpose is to determine those who have been active and cooperative members as well as to identify those who did not participate. Be consistent when evaluating each group member's performance by using the guidelines below.

Question	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
1. Has the student attended team meetings?	1	2	3	4	5
2. Has the student made a serious effort at assigned work before the team meetings?	1	2	3	4	5
3. Has the student made a serious effort to fulfill their team role responsibilities on assignments?	1	2	3	4	5
4. Has the student notified a teammate if they would not be able to attend a meeting or fulfill a responsibility?	1	2	3	4	5
5. Does the student attempt to make contributions in group meetings?	1	2	3	4	5
6. Does the student listen to their teammates' ideas and opinions respectfully and give them careful consideration?	1	2	3	4	5
7. Does the student cooperate with the group?	1	2	3	4	5
	Sum of numbers: _____				
	Sum/7: _____ (Total)				

Based on your responses to these questions, insert one of the given words below: \_\_\_\_\_

Rating system:

**Excellent** Consistently carried more than their fair share of the workload.

**Very good** Consistently did what they were supposed to do, very well prepared and cooperative.

**Satisfactory** Usually did what they were supposed to do, acceptably prepared and cooperative.

**Ordinary** Often did what they were supposed to do, minimally prepared and cooperative.

**Marginal** Sometimes failed to show up or complete assignments, rarely prepared.

**Deficient** Often failed to show up or complete assignments, rarely prepared.

**Unsatisfactory** Consistently failed to show up or complete assignments, rarely prepared.

**Superficial** Practically no participation.

**No show** No participation at all.



### Peer Rating of Team Members

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Your Team \_\_\_\_\_

Please write the names of all your team members, INCLUDING YOURSELF, and rate the degree to which each member fulfilled his/her responsibilities in completing the team assignments. DO NOT LEAVE ANY COMMENTARY BLANK! Place this form in a sealed envelope, with your team name/number on the outside, and give it to your instructor. The possible ratings are as follows:

Rating system:

**Excellent** Consistently carried more than their fair share of the workload.

**Very good** Consistently did what they were supposed to do, very well prepared and cooperative.

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**No show** No participation at all.

Name of team member	Rating	Commentary (DO NOT FORGET TO FILL THIS OUT!)

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## **Team Expectations Agreement**

On a single sheet of paper, put your names and list the rules and expectations you agree to as a team to adopt. You can deal with any or all aspects of the responsibilities outlined above: preparation for and attendance at group meetings, making sure everyone understands all the solutions, communicating frankly but with respect when conflicts arise, etc. Each team member should sign the sheet, indicating acceptance of these expectations and intention to fulfill them. Turn one copy into the teacher and keep a remaining copy or copies for yourselves.

These expectations are for your use, and benefit-they won't be graded or commented on unless you specifically ask for comments. Note, however, that if you make the list thorough while being realistic, you'll be giving yourselves the best chance. For example, "We will each solve every problem in every assignment completely before we get together" or "We will get 100 on every assignment" or "We will never miss a group meeting" are probably unrealistic, but "We will try to set up the problems individually before meeting" and "We will make sure that anyone who misses a meeting for good cause gets caught up on the work" are realistic.

## Team Policies

Your team will have several responsibilities as it completes assignments.

- Designate a coordinator, recorder, and checker for each assignment.
  - Add a monitor for 4-person teams.
  - Rotate these roles for every assignment.
  - For teams of three, the same person should cover the monitor and checker roles.
- Meet and work. As you all work on the activity to develop answers, keep in mind what each roll is supposed to do in addition to doing the work.
  - Coordinator: keeps everyone on task and makes sure everyone is involved.
  - Recorder: prepares the final solution to be turned in.
  - Monitor: checks to make sure everyone understands both the solution and the strategy used to get it.
  - Checker: double-checks it before it is handed in.
  - Agree on roles for next assignment.
- Checker turns in the assignment, with the names on it of every team member who participated actively in completing it. If the checker anticipates a problem getting to class on time on the due date of the assignment, it is their responsibility to make sure someone turns it in.
- Review returned assignments. Make sure everyone understands why points were lost and how to correct errors.
- Consult with your instructor if a conflict arises that can't be worked through by the team.
- Deal with non-cooperative team members. If a team member refuses to cooperate on an assignment, their name should not be included on the completed work. If the problem persists, the team should meet with the instructor so that the problem can be resolved, if possible. If the problem continues, the cooperating team members may notify the uncooperative member in writing that they are in danger of being fired, sending a copy of the memo to the instructor. If there is no subsequent improvement, they should notify the individual in writing (copy to the instructor) that they are no longer with the team. The fired student should meet with their instructor to discuss options. Similarly, students who are consistently doing all the work for their team may issue a warning memo that they will quit unless they start getting cooperation, and a second memo advising they are quitting the team if the cooperation is not forthcoming. Students who get fired or quit will be reassigned to another willing group.

As you will find out, group work isn't always easy. Team members sometimes cannot prepare for or attend group sessions because of other responsibilities, and conflicts often result from differing skill levels and work ethics. When teams work and communicate well, however, the benefits more than compensate for the difficulties. One way to improve the chances that a team will work well is to agree beforehand on what everyone on the team expects from everyone else. Reaching this understanding is the goal of the assignment on the Team Expectations Agreement handout.