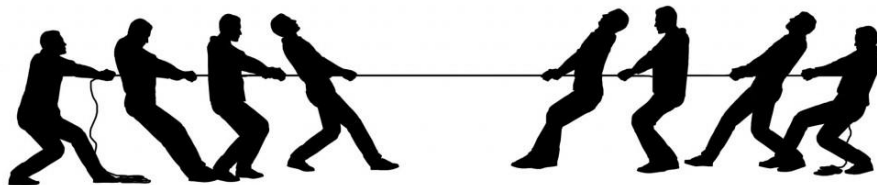


Has lockdown highlighted social loafers in your firm?

I read in the Sunday Times an article from Matthew Syed who talked about Max Ringlemann a French engineer fascinated by the mechanics of human action. In the 1800's he conducted a famous experiment, asking his students to pull as hard as possible on a rope attached to a dynamometer. Each student pulled an average of 85kg, roughly in line with Ringlemann's expectations. But then he added a twist. He placed the students into a team of seven, one behind the other, and asked them to pull again. What happened? The pull of each individual declined by 25%. This phenomenon is seen in so many contexts that psychologists have given it a name: social loafing. It happens when people let others take the strain. The students continued to look as if they were trying, grunting and gritting their teeth, but a dynamometer doesn't lie. The total pull of the group summing the individual contributions should have been 595kg. In fact, it amounted to a mere 505kg.



Anybody who has worked in a team will recognise this phenomenon. They will have seen colleagues pretending to beaver away while taking things easy. They will also have noted how corrosive it can be when even a small minority decides to slack. As one psychologist said: "Social loafing can prove contagious because those putting in a shift start to feel like suckers."

In lockdown we will all have people who work just as hard or even harder, however virtual teams will find it hard to know what their colleagues are doing so it can be tempting to free-ride their endeavours. How will you as a leader inspire the discretionary effort that can help your team be successful or for some to fail? I have read endless articles and most of them include Performance, People, Profit and Purpose as the four "P's" to concentrate on as a leader. Do you think strategically



about how to connect teammates to one another so that they have a shared purpose? We now more than ever need to think beyond the Zoom call that was a virtual drink, quiz, walk. That was great but the longer we work virtually the more we need to have a shared purpose.



Many years ago, I worked for a recruitment firm that were proud to have one of the Magic Circle law firms as a major client. Every team in the firm worked with the client, we were one of many recruitments firms they used, and we did not fill every position they sent us. As a director I sat with those teams and asked what they knew about the client? Everyone knew the size, how many people worked there and where they were located globally. We discussed what really did make them different as a firm and why would candidates we were sending there really want to work for them. The values the firm had were inclusive, they valued the contribution everyone made, their ethical standards were high both internally and externally and they thought about the wellbeing of their teams. Once everyone understood these values, they really questioned candidates about what they wanted from a firm they worked for. This commitment took us from one of many recruiters to a first-choice recruiter. We were committed in a different way to all be the best for this client and it made a significant difference.

Teamwork does make a difference and virtual working, where people are geographically dispersed and will perhaps remain so for some time need to have a sense of purpose. Staff will need meaningful interactions not a casual "Are you OK?" at the beginning of a Zoom call. People are our most important reputational issue; they need to work well together not just individually to bring shared purpose and lasting success.