

FROM BAD APPLES TO SOUR GRAPES: THE INFLUENCE OF BAD APPLES ON GROUP DYNAMICS AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract

“Although our whole group worked as hard as we can, we didn't get the score we wanted and I believe it's due to a certain team member dragging us down.”

Anonymous Student, Consumer Behavior, Spring 2013

Student group projects are common in business courses (e.g., Bacon, Stewart, & Stewart-Belle, 1998; Chapman & Van Auken, 2001; Darian & Coopersmith, 2001; Hernadez, 2002; Kennedy & Dull, 2007), and the skills students develop in these experiences are valued by employers (Halfhill & Nielsen, 2007; Vance, 2007). Unfortunately, many times students have a bad experience with their groups (e.g., Ashraf, 2004; Batra, Walvoord, & Krishnan, 1997; Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe, 2009; Pang, Tong, & Wong, 2011). Of particular interest here is the detrimental influence a negative group member has on group dynamics and outcomes. We will refer to the individuals that have a negative influence on the group as bad apples, as captured by the phrase “A bad apple spoils the barrel.” These bad apple group members are commonly described as withholding effort, being affectively negative, and violating interpersonal norms (Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006). Bad apples exist in all organizations and they have tangible negative influences on company culture and performance (Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006; Kerr, et al, 2009; O'Boyle, Forsyth, & O'Boyle, 2011; Tyler, 2004). Wetlaufer (1994) calls these bad apples “team destroyers” noting that the negative behaviors of one individual on a team can have significant repercussions on group dynamics and outcomes. We show that bad apples have a statistically significant negative impact on team effectiveness, interpersonal relationships, cohesiveness and satisfaction, and significantly increase team conflict. A strong contribution of this study is that we also link the impact of bad apples on grades earned by students. We find a clear and convincing statistically significant pattern that the presence of bad apples results in lower grades for the groups who have bad apples. To our knowledge, this is the first study to show this type of impact on grade outcomes. In addition, we explore the role of peer evaluations in a group project environment (Bowes-Sperry et al, 2005; Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999; Dominick, Reilly, & McGourty, 1997; Fellenz, 2006; Gueldenzoph & May, 2002; Hughes & Jones, 2011; Loughry & Tosi, 2008; Thomas, Martin, & Pleasants, 2011). We compare groups who received one peer evaluation at the end of the term with groups who received one peer evaluation during the semester and a second peer evaluation at the end of the term to see if multiple peer evaluations reduce the presence and impact of bad apples. We find that multiple peer evaluations do reduce team conflict and increase team satisfaction. Overall our findings highlight the need for faculty to take a much more active role in identifying and managing bad apples when they are present in groups.

References Available Upon Request