

## 7.2: Group Motivation and Collaboration

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify two fundamental questions related to group motivation and collaboration
2. Identify factors that affect the ability to exercise persuasion and influence toward motivating collaborative behavior in groups

*Your corn is ripe today; mine will be so tomorrow. 'Tis profitable for us both, that I should labour with you today, and that you should aid me tomorrow. - David Hume*

*"Let everyone sweep in front of his own door, and the whole world will be clean." - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

"A dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets, but on the 12th floor of the Acme Building, one man is still trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions: Guy Noir, Private Eye." Since 1974, Garrison Keillor (Keillor, G. (2012, May 26). *Guy Noir, private eye*. Retrieved from <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/2012/05/26/scripts/noir.shtml>) has hosted a nationally-broadcast weekly radio program called "A Prairie Home Companion." One regular feature of Keillor's show, about a bumbling detective from Minnesota, has always begun with the words we've just quoted.

The fictitious detective may not know it, but among life's persistent questions are those dealing with motivation and collaboration. As the theologian H.E. Luccock wrote, "No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it." The same goes for any other group of people: no individual can carry the whole load or produce the whole group's required outcomes.

Before we analyze motivation and collaboration in detail, let's first lay the groundwork by considering what we mean by the terms. Engleburg and Wynn, (Engleberg, I.N., & Wynn, D. R. (2013). *Working in groups* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Pearson) wrote that motivation consists of giving a person "a cause, or reason, to act." Collaboration, in turn, consists of joint expenditure of energy by two or more people in pursuit of a shared goal or aim.

### Two Fundamental Questions

We can see that two fundamental questions need to be confronted by anyone who hopes to motivate a group to collaborate:

1. How can we induce any single individual to act in any particular way?
2. How can we induce many individuals to act together?

Society can function only if people are motivated to collaborate in groups. Getting people to do that, however, can be extremely difficult. As Garrison Keillor would put it, it's a persistent question, and it's one that can tire people out if they persist in trying to answer it. One of Keillor's "Guy Noir" episodes illustrates this reality.

The episode describes a field trip by a middle school band class to Washington, D.C. Ostensibly, the purpose of the field trip is to have the students produce and perform music together while enjoying the experience of visiting the capital. Once the group reaches the National Mall however, its band director gives up on any attempt to herd his students from one destination to another—to collaborate. When Guy sweetly asks one of the girls in the band why she has shaved half her head and why a boy has tattoos on his ears, she calls him a freak and tells him to mind his own business. Soon the clarinet section moves off in six different directions and the percussion section disappears entirely.

In the middle of all this, the band director is wearing earplugs to avoid having to listen to his students. "Earplugs; they're a blessing," he claims, as a noisy motorcycle nearly flattens him. "I'm going to retire in two weeks to Wyoming," he continues, where "the only horns are on the cattle and the only winds are in the trees."

As far as musical performance is concerned, the band director lets his students play three-minute concerts because he can't get them to concentrate any longer than that. (The idea of making things short by eliminating repetition is, Keillor writes, revolutionary in Washington).

People in the real world generally show better manners and are able to focus more readily than the characters in this fictional account. Still, motivating real people to collaborate is no simple matter. Garrison Keillor wrote this about the actual Washington, D.C.: "It occurred to me that most of the people I saw in Washington were special needs people, and the Congress is designed for verbally aggressive listening-impaired people, and that months go by and nothing gets done, and in an election year, less than nothing, and maybe that's what the balance of powers means."

## Persuasion and Influence

Hybels & Weaver, (Hybels, S., & Weaver, R.L. (1998). *Communicating effectively* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill). indicated that getting people to act in a certain way requires persuasion and influence. How and where to best direct the persuasion and influence, however, will vary with time. It may be possible to motivate people to work together at certain times on certain tasks, but not at other times on other tasks. Why? Think back to those middle school students. Many factors will vary from time to time, including these:

Individuals' and groups' level of receptiveness. Sometimes we're open to suggestions and proposals; sometimes we're not. Middle school students, for instance, might be more apt to collaborate right after a good lunch than first thing in the morning or in the late afternoon.

The surrounding circumstances. We're more likely to focus our attention if we're not distracted by external noise or other sensory inputs. Putting middle school students in the middle of a bustling urban center is not likely to help them focus on a joint task.

People's physical condition. Obviously, if a group task is physically demanding, those who possess strength or stamina will be better able to participate than those who don't. If the middle school students were hot or exhausted, they'd be less likely to cooperate in getting anything done together. The wise grandmother of one of the authors of this book always used to advise other parents, "If your kids aren't cooperating, feed them."

People's attitudes toward a particular task. Getting people to do what they already want to do is no big deal; someone has written that an easy way to be a leader is to "watch where people are headed and just get out in front of them." Middle school students might not need a lot of persuasion to eat a few boxes of pizza together out on the grass by the Washington Monument. To get them to walk quietly together through an exhibit of Renaissance porcelain in the National Gallery of Art, on the other hand, would not be easy.

Lest we conclude that motivating people to collaborate is a hopeless enterprise, we can look around us any day and see that, although it isn't easy, it is possible. Tyler and Blader, (Tyler, T.R., & Blader, S.L. (2000). *Cooperation in groups*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press) pointed out that intentional actions, policies, and practices can often influence people's dispositions, and through them shape cooperation. We'll consider some such actions, policies, and practices later in this chapter. Above all, we'll see that adopting a flexible attitude can help us influence people to adopt the motivation to collaborate.

## Key Takeaway

Motivating people to collaborate in groups is challenging because the effectiveness of persuasion and influence depend on changeable human factors.

### Exercise 7.2.1

1. If you were leading a middle-school field trip, what principles and practices would you follow to yield better results than the ones described by Garrison Keillor?
2. Think of a time when you or someone in a group with you successfully motivated the group to take action. What factors of the situation contributed favorably to the positive motivation? What factors made it difficult to motivate the group?

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