

**Group Dynamics of the UCSB Cheer Team: An Application of Group Cohesion and Social  
Loafing Theory**

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## **Group Dynamics of the UCSB Cheer Team**

UC Santa Barbara's cheer team is unique to other sports teams on campus: their coach is based in Sacramento and only attends practice once every few months. Thus, the captains' role is that of an informal coach. They must take on a greater responsibility of not just leading the team, but also guiding the team through the practice schedule, offering feedback and guidance for new members, and relaying progress reports to the coach. The hierarchical boundaries are less clear, as the captains are responsible for mediating inter-team conflicts and holding slacking members accountable while still being members of the team. What would happen if the captains were involved in the conflict or needed to be held accountable? We observed the cheer team's practices to analyze these compelling group dynamics.

The warm ups, conditioning, and stretching routines were done collectively, on the same count. However, a majority practice was split into groups of four (squads) in which they independently ran drills. Throughout practice, we noticed a varying degree of psychological safety among the team members. That is, members were comfortable with making mistakes and freely asked questions, however, some showcased more comfort than others. At times, returning members would interrupt the captains' explanation of a drill with a clarifying question, while newer members would engage in side conversations to ask for clarification. Mistakes occur often, one of the captains explained to us, "You're going to see some people fall. It happens all the time." The best performing squad, notably consisting of returning members, usually executed skills with perfection, but would laugh off mistakes and missed counts when it occurred. Yet squads with newer members showcased discomfort and lack of trust when consecutive mistakes and near falls occurred.

Conversely, the cheer team lacked in group cohesion and social loafing. There were clear discrepancies between members' commitment and effort levels; members who displayed higher commitment were in the front of the group, exerting more effort in the warm up exercises and participating in the group counting whereas those in the back of the group appeared to go through the motions and not actively participate in counting, despite group-wide expectation that everyone needs to contribute. We observed that those who exerted more effort to group-oriented activities had longer experience on the team. Additionally, we noticed that squads would often miss group counts in drills, not because of errors, but rather due to distractions from each other. Members chatting and joking within their squads would miss important instructions from captains and cause the group drills to look unsynchronized— which is one of the main criteria competitive cheer teams are evaluated on. Thus, we turn to group cohesion and social loafing theory to analyze these communication issues.

Cohesion has historically been considered one of the most important variables in the study of small group dynamics (Pescosolido and Saavedra, 2012). When the performance of a team relies heavily on close cooperation between teammates, cohesion is particularly important. Professional sports teams are an obvious example where cohesion on a team is often the critical difference between league winners and those that do not make the playoffs. Cohesion becomes especially important when the safety of team members is at stake, and gaps in performance and cooperation can lead to injury. Because a cheer team falls into this category, it is worth looking more closely at the concept of cohesion and how it relates to performance.

In a meta analysis of about 50 studies, Muller and Copper (1994) found a significant relationship between cohesiveness and performance. The magnitude of the relationship was small other than with sports teams, where the effect was strong. In their analysis of the data the

effect was driven primarily by the level of commitment to the task by the members of the team. “Commitment to the task represents a clear acceptance on the part of the individual of the salience and legitimacy of standards of excellence in performance” (Muller and Cooper, 1994, p. 225). Task performance comes from the commitment of the individuals to the task of the team (Pescosolido and Saavedra, 2012). Group cohesion can result from interdependent work requiring high levels of coordination. Basically, commitment to a task leads to cohesion AND performance.

In addition to task focus, higher cohesion is linked to higher levels of trust and communication between team members. In a study of about 700 athletes in 60 professional sports clubs in Spain, Mach et al. (2010) observed that team cohesion is tightly linked to trust between teammates, and that higher levels of team trust increase the likelihood of better team performance. They found that trust is an important part of teamwork because team tasks require a high level of interdependence between members (Mach et al., 2010). Trust within teams allows members to work cooperatively towards achieving organization goals and add value to their organization. To have trust between members there needs to be cohesion. With cohesion, there can be a shared understanding and an ability to coordinate team strategy and effort in real time during competition (Pescosolido and Saavedra, 2012). Mach et al. (2010) suggest that what makes the difference in a team’s overall performance is the synergy and cooperation (cohesion, trust and communication) between the members of the team as a whole, rather than the individual technical skills of specific players.

Sports teams operate in extremely clear environments, with goals, member roles, procedures, and resources well-defined. There are generally no structural conflicts in sports teams because the ‘rules of the game’ are well understood by everyone (Pescosolido and

Saavedra, 2012). As a result, what needs to be done and how to do it are clear. In the environment of a sports team, or similar teams where performance is easily observed, measured, and required to be repeated regularly, then cohesion plays a strong role in making a team more effective. A clear commitment to the task of the team by all members leads to cohesion. With cohesion, trust and communication can be high. With those factors in place, synergy between the members can be high and that has been demonstrated to be directly linked to team performance.

Through the conceptualization of group cohesion through commitment to task, trust, and communication amongst one another, there is concrete, observational evidence that the cheer team possesses low cohesion as a whole. The cheer team demonstrated a flawed, hierarchical, communicative structure through a presence of ingroups and outgroups, varying degrees of commitment to task, and weak interpersonal relations between members. When observing the communicative dynamics within the group, there seemed to be an inner circle and outer circle structure, made up of individuals more experienced and less experienced respectively. Those in the inner circle showed greater familiarity, vocal and comedic expression, and were much more comfortable than those with less experience in the outer circle. This was displayed in the position many individuals sat relative to one another during stretching circles, with those in the inner circle sitting near to another laughing and talking frequently while those in the outer circle were distant from one another and unengaged in conversation. Additionally, team captains in charge of the practices were also part of the inner circle group, further playing into the dominance of the ingroup. The structure in these circles creates a loose hierarchy of communication and division in the group, where those who were more experienced and comfortable felt psychologically safe to express opinions, concerns, and search for feedback, while the others do not. Members of the cheer team also exhibited varying degrees of commitment to the task and the identity of the

group, possibly a result of the communicative divide. This can be observed from the varying levels of accountability within a group and ranging levels of engagement with activity between members at the front and at the back of the group. Furthermore, after practice many members do not stay after practice to converse or practice longer than the designated time, while some amongst the inner circle do, demonstrating differing levels of commitment to the task. Finally, the cheer team exhibited weak interpersonal relationships and trust in one another, revealed through behaviors reflecting distance, unfamiliarity, and reservation between team members. Behaviors would include ones of visible frustration and stress after a failed stunt, lack of shared eye contact between members, with minimal interaction with one another during breaks and awkward laughing when mistakes were made. In the context of a cheer team where there are high levels of coordination between members during a trick and extreme measures of commitment to a stunt, a high level of trust and interdependence between members is vital in the group's performance. Through these observations there shows to be little group cohesion in weak relational foundation, trust, and familiarity in which members can perform together, lowering the application of possible synergy to be engaged in, thus hindering performance.

When working in group environments, the possibility of social loafing is always present, especially when dealing with interactive teams. Social loafing can be described as “the reduction in individual effort when people work in groups” (Lam, 2015). Essentially, social loafing is when people feel they can slack off when working in a group. Social loafing can also include the topic of perceived social loafing, which is the team members' estimations of how much they feel other members are contributing to the team effort. Both social loafing and perceived social loafing are crucial topics to consider when researching groups, in this case, the UCSB cheer team.

According to Chris Lam of the University of North Texas, social loafing occurs because, “individuals expect their effort to be less likely to lead to valued outcomes when working collectively than when working coactively,” explaining that people feel their individual efforts are less helpful when they are in a group compared to when working with only one other person or on their own (Lam, 2015). Additionally, team members can sometimes assume other group members won't pull their weight, and therefore they themselves will slack so as to not get taken advantage of. This can be referred to as the “*sucker effect*” (Lam, 2015). This phenomenon supports the idea that some teammates would sometimes rather fail than carry the loads of social loafers. It is also explained that the larger the group, the easier it is for group members to hide in anonymity, increasing the likelihood of social loafing within the group. Several studies have shown that with increased group cohesion comes decreased social loafing, leading to more productive teams. According to Figure 1 by Lam, it is shown how the combination of positive communication practices grouped with a group's cohesion towards the task at hand can lead to decreased social loafing. Overall, social loafing is a problem many teams and groups experience, one of which we can apply when researching the UCSB Cheer team.

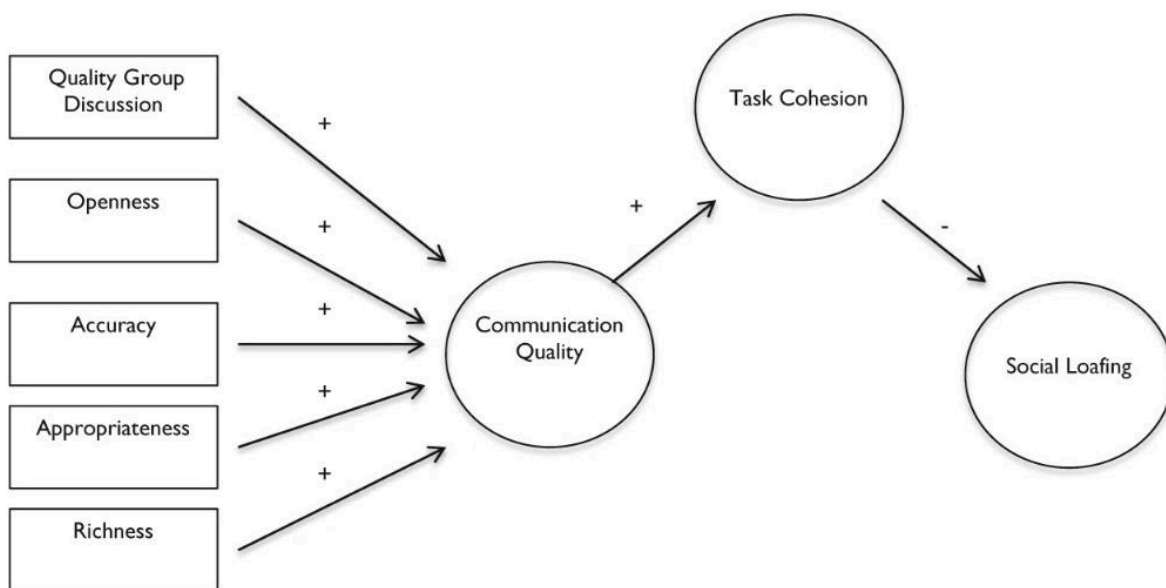
While observing the UCSB Cheer team, social loafing was evident in various aspects. We can assume that social loafing is present due to the coach's absence during their practices. Teammates can slack off more, knowing there won't be any initial consequences. However, it is vital for the team to be held accountable all season because once competition starts, their performance will clearly reflect their work all season long. When observing the cheer team, it was noticeable how some performed less, knowing they were in a large group setting. After the team broke up into their stunt groups, girls started to perform better, knowing that the team captains would see their mistakes. The social loafers impacted the team dynamics, which was

highly noticeable when girls went for water breaks. During water breaks, more than half of the team pulled out their phone, which showed the girls' dissatisfaction towards the tasks at hand. Since cheerleading relies so heavily on coordination and synchronization, everyone must be held accountable. If certain teammates consistently rely on the team's overall performance, assuming others will compensate for their lack of effort, it could lead to social loafing. One stunt group, in particular, were social loafers because they continued to make mistakes but relied on the high-performing stunt groups to cover their slack. To further address the issue of social loafing, the team captains could start by holding each individual accountable by highlighting each member's role in the team's success. The team captains can also set clear expectations before each practice to ensure the girls are committed to practice and performances. Creating a space with psychological safety can also allow team members to try new things without consequences. While team members are practicing new tricks, providing feedback and encouragement to each member can lead to higher morale. By addressing social loafing, the team captains can foster an environment where each team member feels accountable for their contributions to the team.

To conclude, we applied group cohesion and social loafing theory into our analysis of the group dynamics of UCSB's cheer team. The cheer team exhibited low levels of group cohesion through the emergence of in and out groups based on seniority, demonstrating various levels of commitment, and weak interpersonal ties. Additionally, we witnessed social loafing occur throughout practices due to the coach's absence, particularly when the captains' attention was occupied and were not able to provide feedback. To remedy these communication issues, we suggest captains highlight each member's individual role and importance to the team which in turn, would raise commitment to the team and motivation to contribute maximum effort.



Figure 1



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