Coping with Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams[†]

You will usually find your university 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 others: 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 worked 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 infrequently 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. You e-mail him, but he's "too busy to answer."
- Jack misses every meeting—he always promises 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 wondering sometimes if he's right.

Your group finally was so upset they went to discuss the situation with Professor Distracted. He 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 the group was not communicating effectively. He 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. Oh yes—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 back the dysfunctional behavior of the hitchhiker, so the hitchhiker pays the price—not you. Never accept accusations, blame, or criticism from a hitchhiker. Maintain your own sense of reality despite what the hitchhiker says, (easier said

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than done). *Show 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 professor.
- 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 professors allow a team to fire a student, so the would-be freeloader has to work alone the rest of the semester. Discuss this option with your instructor 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 much advantage—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 e-mails, 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 e-mail for contacting purposes, because then a written record is available about the contact attempt. Copying the e-mail to Jack's supervisor or other important people can often produce surprisingly effective results.)
- Keep in mind 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 their 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 really 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—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 he/she won't like me—it's not worth the pain!' But many people just like you have had exactly the same troubled reaction the first few (or even many) times they tried to be firm. Just keep trying—and stick to your guns! Someday 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 have to 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 so as 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 take action. Many professors allow you the leeway to request a move to another team. (You cannot move to another group on your own.) Your professor will probably ask some questions before taking the appropriate action.

Later on—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 could 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.