

## How to Manage Yourself in a Collaborative Team

You will usually find your 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 group this marking period with three others: Mary, Henrietta, and Jack. Mary is okay—she struggles with some of the more difficult material, but she tries hard, and she willingly does things like getting extra help from the teacher. Henrietta is irritating. She's nice, but she just doesn't put in the effort to do a good job. She'll sheepishly hand over partially worked homework problems and confess to spending the weekend watching TV. Jack, however, has been nothing but trouble. Here are a few of the things he has done:

- Jack infrequently turns in his part of an assignment. When he does, it's almost always wrong—he obviously spent just enough time to scribble something down that looks what it's supposed to be.
- He is off task or flees whenever the group works together, either in person or virtually. He always seems to be out of his seat for some reason—needing to go to the bathroom, getting a drink, covertly distracting other students in the class.
- When the group communicates outside of class, he ghosts them and later claims he never received any messages. If the group decides to meet before or after school, he has a litany of excuses as to why he can't meet.
- Jack's writing skills are okay, but he loses the drafts and doesn't reread his work. You've stopped assigning him work because you don't want to miss your teacher's strict deadlines.
- He speaks loudly and confidently when you try to discuss his behavior—he thinks the problems are everyone else's fault. He is so self-assured that you sometimes find yourself thinking he's right.
- Worse yet, whenever the group has to present to the class, Jack jumps at the chance to take the lead. He is a smooth talker and presents the group's ideas and work as his own.

Your group finally was so upset they went to discuss the situation with Mr. Meanswell, your teacher. He, in turn, talked to Jack, who sincerely and convincingly said he hadn't understood what everyone wanted him to do. Mr. Meanswell said the problem must be that the group was not communicating effectively. He noticed you, Mary, and Henrietta looked angry and agitated, while Jack simply looked bewildered, a little hurt, and not at all guilty. It was easy for Mr. Meanswell 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... and 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. However, the nicer you and your teammates are (or the nicer you think you are being), the more you are allowing Jack to take advantage of you. By absorbing Jack’s problems, you are inadvertently training him to become the kind of person who thinks it is all right to avoid his share of the work and take credit for the work of others.

### *What This Group Should Have Done: Mirroring*

It’s important to reflect dysfunctional team behavior, so the ones causing the problems pay the price, not their teammates. Criticism can help you grow as a person, but there will also be a few people who will unfairly accuse, blame, or criticize you—even saying things so untrue that you can’t believe what you’re hearing. (This is called “gaslighting” after the old movie *Gaslight*, in which a sinister character tries to make the heroine doubt her perception and lose her sanity by denying he could see what she saw.) It is essential to maintain your own sense of reality despite what you may be accused of. Show you have limits to the behavior you will accept. Communicate these limits and act consistently on them. For example, here is what the group could have done:

- When Jack didn’t respond to the group’s messages or couldn’t find time to meet in his busy schedule, even when alternatives were suggested, someone needed to talk to the teacher. The group shouldn’t have wasted their time continuing to try to get him to meet.
- 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 be supportive if something unexpected arises.) Many teachers allow a team to fire a student, so the student has to work alone the rest of the marking period. Discuss this option with your teacher if the student has not contributed over the course of an assignment or two, or as part of the project.
- If Jack turns in poorly prepared homework or projects, 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 what you say!* If Jack gets abusive, show the teacher his work. Do this the *second time* the junk is submitted, before Jack has taken much advantage—not after a month, when you are really getting frustrated.
- Set your standards early and high, because people like Jack have an uncanny ability to detect just how much they can get away with.
- 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. Jack 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 the cause, the marking period 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 Jack takes advantage of you and the rest of your group!

### *Henrietta—Taking Things Easy*

Although Henrietta stood up with the rest of the group to try to battle against Jack’s irrational behavior, she also hasn’t been pulling her weight.

The best way to deal with someone like Henrietta is the way you deal with someone like Jack: set firm, explicit expectations. Although students like Henrietta are not as manipulative as students like Jack, they will definitely test your limits. If your limits are weak, you then share the blame for having Henrietta’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 people like Jack or Henrietta can assist you in growing as a person and learning 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 they won’t like me—it’s not worth the pain!” Many people just like you have had precisely the same troubled reaction the first times they were firm. Just keep trying—and *stick to your expectations!* Someday it will seem more natural, and you won’t feel so guilty about having reasonable expectations of others. In the meantime, you will find you have more time to spend with your friends, after school activities, or schoolwork, because you aren’t doing someone else’s work along with your own.

### *Common Characteristics that Allow Others to Take Advantage*

- You like to make others happy, even at your own expense.
- You are willing to repeatedly make personal sacrifices so as not to abandon a teammate—without realizing you are devaluing yourself in this process.
- You can cooperate but not delegate.
- You interpret the slightest improved contribution as “progress.”
- You are not willing to allow someone else to fail and subsequently learn from their own mistakes.
- You are devoted to the idea of “the good of the team”—without the common-sense realization that this attitude can allow others to take advantage of you.

### *A Related Circumstance: You’re Doing All the Work*

As soon as you become aware that everyone is leaving the work to you, or doing such shoddy work that you are left doing it all—you need to take action. First issue a formal warning, and if that doesn’t work, go to the teacher and request to be moved to another group. (You cannot move to another group on your own.) Your teacher will probably ask some questions before taking the appropriate action.

### *Later—Out on the Job and in Your Personal Life*

You will meet people like Jack and Henrietta throughout your life. People like Henrietta are relatively benign and can even become your friends. However, people like Jack can be completely different—they can work their way into your confidence and then destroy it through gossip and gaslighting. If you encounter that situation, it will help if you keep in mind the techniques suggested above.