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Critical Review of Devil's Advocate Strategy

A classic issue in group projects occurs when some teammates don't pull their weight, forcing others to work harder. Most high school and college students experience this frustration, with seemingly no solution. Taking on the extra work can feel demoralizing, but ignoring the work may cause it to be completed sloppily or not be completed at all. This struggle is only one of many that can occur in a team environment. Another struggle in the world of teamwork is known as groupthink, and it can occur even if group work is evenly divided. Groupthink is the result of excessive agreement with other teammates and uniform thinking. Team members may be afraid to raise ideas that oppose the group, even if the ideas are beneficial. With proper knowledge of the underlying details of groupthink, one can improve team efficiency. One possible strategy to prevent groupthink is by secretly assigning a person to be a "devil's advocate." This person aims to disrupt groupthink by raising points that counter the group's consensus. A study has analyzed this devil's advocate strategy, and it is named "The Devil's Advocate: A Strategy to Avoid Groupthink and Stimulate Discussion in Focus Groups." This study involved secretly converting team members into devil's advocates and then collecting interview data about the perceived effectiveness of the strategy. Although interviews may contain some bias and inaccuracy, it is the most reasonable way for the writer to support their argument on a topic like this. It would be difficult to collect numerical data to measure the effectiveness of the strategy. The article has a clear logical structure. It begins with a summary, then explains the

concept of groupthink. Next, the research details are described, including the instructions for the devil's advocate. The interview results are included next, along with a final section describing the implications. One of the authors of this study is Frances Baum, who is a social scientist. She has plenty of other work, meaning that she is experienced in the field. The other writer could not be found online. The study includes some positive and negative interview results. One response is as follows, "It was useful, I remember at least one occasion when the devil's advocate put another viewpoint that I hadn't considered-opens up your mind a bit" (MacDougall 538). This response generally describes the main benefits of a devil's advocate. Another worker mentioned that the devil's advocate got "too much into the issues" (MacDougall 539). Since the goal of this strategy is to raise ideas to counter the group consensus, some people may raise too many countering ideas because their conversation is being forced. This was one of the commonly mentioned issues from the interviewed workers, along with a lack of knowledge about the raised issues, and quietness. The writer predicted that "face-to-face training including a trial focus group would deal with many of these criticisms." The writer concludes that the devil's advocate strategy is a useful tool, although it should not necessarily be forced into every team. This conclusion can benefit team managers, as well as team workers, to increase team efficiency. The article does not attempt to persuade the reader into making this conclusion. Instead, the findings of the study are described in an unbiased way. Some shortcomings can be pointed out in this article: The data collection method only involved interview questions. This limits the size of the study to a smaller scale and can involve inaccuracies. Numerical data could help to reinforce the claims of the study. Another missing component is the raw collected data. It would be useful to see the full interview responses, but only a few quotes are included.

Research Proposal to Relate Relationships with Team Performance

Statement of Purpose

I propose a research procedure to study how various relationships between teammates affect team performance. These relationships will include friendship, hostility, and neutrality. This will uncover knowledge that will allow for improved team efficiency. This could be useful to team managers and team workers who want to increase productivity. Team projects are very common around the world, so this study is relevant to a wide range of people. I am currently working in a team in which I could directly apply these findings. Particularly, I would likely apply friendship to my group. The effects of friendship on team productivity have already been studied, and it has been found that "friendship has a significant positive effect on group task performance" (Durrah 1). I hypothesize that my results will match these findings for friendship, but other types of relationships may have different results. It seems logical that hostile relationships would result in decreased performance, but it is possible for groups to handle the conflict positively. Strong teams "should be able to challenge each other's thinking and debate" (Perry). This is a process that involves a good form of conflict.

Research Plan

Potential participants will be randomly selected from the student body of an entire college campus, and emails will be sent to each of these students. The email will look similar to the following:

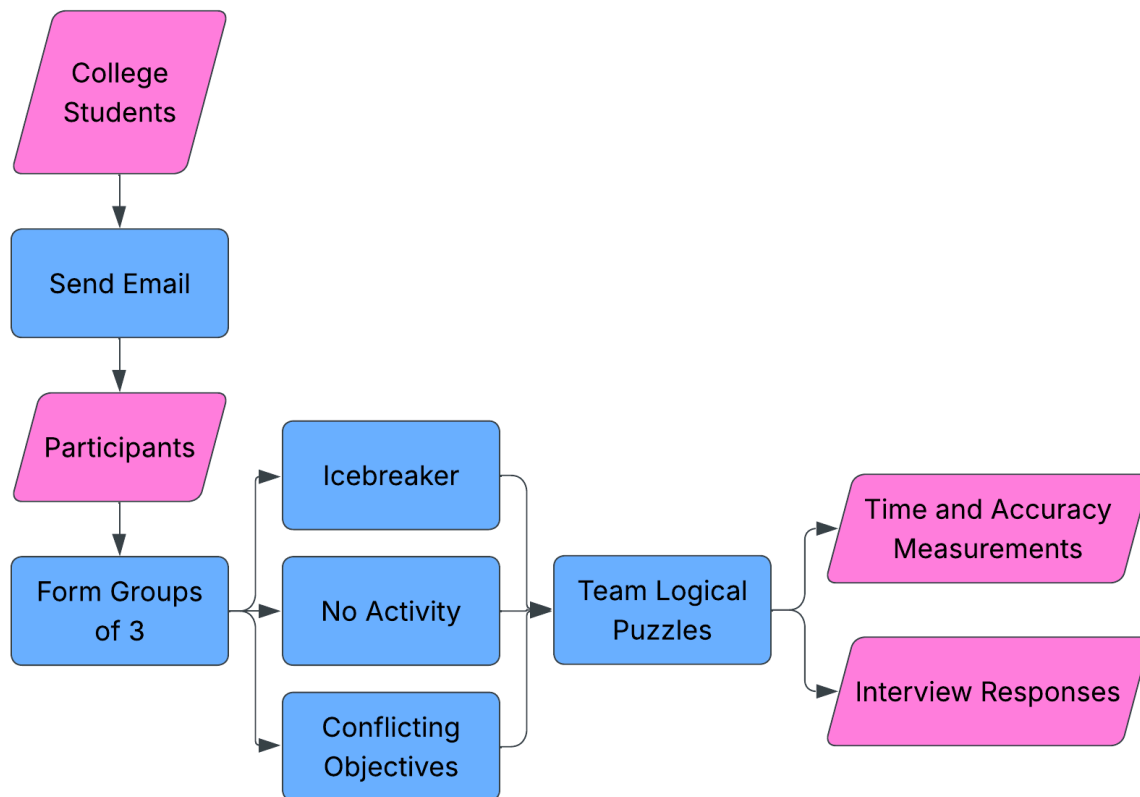
Group Work Study - 10\$ Reward

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a study of group behavior, with a reward of 10\$. Please bring a laptop. You will be placed into a group of three students and will need to complete a team task.

Thank you for your time.

This email does not describe the entire setup of the study. In particular, it does not mention the type of team task. The task is meant to be a surprise and will be a series of logical puzzles that require group effort. Since the participants don't know the task beforehand, the group will not skew towards only puzzle lovers. The email also does not mention the setup tasks that will occur before the team puzzles. Setup tasks will be used to create various relationships between teammates. The participants should act naturally during the setup tasks, so it is best to leave it as a surprise. There will be 3 setup tasks, each of which will create either hostility, friendship, or no relationship. To create friendship, an icebreaker will be performed. To create no relationship, there would be no setup task. To create hostility, team members will be given conflicting information. After the setup tasks, the groups will be tasked with timed logic puzzles. The completion time and accuracy will be recorded. Interview responses will also be recorded from the participants. This general form of study is referred to as a focus group, and is "an increasingly popular qualitative research method in health research to gain insight into complex problems" (MacDougall 532). A diagram of the research plan is shown below. The setup tasks are shown, but will be described more in the next section:



Draft of Research Materials

Three unique setup tasks will be used to promote three different types of relationships between group members. These will be performed before the main performance tasks. The setup tasks are listed below:

Icebreaker: Common Ground Challenge

Each group will be tasked with finding 3 things that all group members have in common. More unique commonalities should be prioritized. This icebreaker will increase friendliness in the group because of shared traits.

No Activity

The participants will skip straight to the performance task, without any setup task. This will simulate a neutral relationship between team members.

Conflicting Objectives

The group of three participants will be separated, and each person will be given unique instructions. One will be told to optimize for speed in the performance task, while another will be told to optimize for accuracy. The third participant will be given neutral instructions. All of these instructions will be given verbally, so that the participants can't verify the discrepancy. They will likely argue, simulating a hostile relationship.

Three logic puzzles will be assigned to each group. Speed and accuracy data will be recorded upon completion of the puzzles. The three puzzles are listed below:

Chicken Crossing

"A man has to get a fox, a chicken, and a sack of corn across a river. He has a rowboat, and it can only carry him and one other thing. If the fox and the chicken are left together, the fox will eat the chicken. If the chicken and the corn are left together, the chicken will eat the corn. How does the man do it?" (Rider).

Three Switches

"There is a lightbulb inside a closet. The door is closed, and you cannot see if the light is on or off through the door. However, you know the light is off to start. Outside of the closet, there are three light switches. One of the door light switches controls the lightbulb in the closet. You can flip the switches however you want, but once you open the door, you can no longer touch the switches. How do you figure out without a doubt which of the three light switches controls the light?" (Merminod).

Two Ropes

"You have two ropes coated in an oil to help them burn. Each rope will take exactly 1 hour to burn all the way through. However, the ropes do not burn at constant rates—there are spots where they burn a little faster and spots where they burn a little slower, but it always takes 1 hour to finish the job. With a lighter to ignite the ropes, how can you measure exactly 45 minutes?" (Bennet).

Working Bibliography

Karau, Steven, and Kipling Williams. "Social Loafing: A Meta-Analytic Review and Theoretical Integration." Purdue University, 11 May 1993,

www.psych.purdue.edu/~willia55/392F-'06/KarauWilliamsMetaAnalysisJPSP.pdf.

Contains evidence supporting the concept of social loafing. It can help to explain why social loafing occurs.

Irving, Janis. "Groupthink : Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes." Internet Archive, 1982, archive.org/details/groupthinkpsycho00jani/page/n9/mode/2up.

Describes aspects of groupthink, such as the conditions that lead to it, and the effects of groupthink.

De Dreu, Carsten, and Laurie Weingart. "Task Versus Relationship Conflict, Team Performance, and Team Member Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis." Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 30 Oct. 2002,

web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Negotiation_and_Conflict_Management/De_Dreu_Weingart_Task-conflict_Meta-analysis.pdf.

Contains evidence supporting a link between conflict and negative team performance.

This will be useful because it relates to my research plan for hostile relationships.

Edmondson, Amy. "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams."

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, June 1999,

web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf.

Explains the concept of team psychological safety, an effect that can lead to more risky team decisions. I could analyze the perceived safety of participants in my study.

Works Cited

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- Perry, Elizabeth. "Productive Conflict Isn't Bad, Especially in the Workplace." BetterUp, 21 Jan. 2025, www.betterup.com/blog/productive-conflict.