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The Relationship Between Group Cohesion, Group Norms, and Perceived Social Loafing in Soccer Teams

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The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between group cohesion, group norms, and perceived social loafing among 118 soccer players playing junior league in Norway. Each player completed a questionnaire assessing group cohesion (task cohesion and social cohesion), team norms (productive norms, role involvement, and social support norms), and perceived social loafing. As predicted, all cohesion- and team-norm subscales were negatively correlated with perceived social loafing. Furthermore, the results showed that the players' attraction to their team's task as well as their perception of the productive- and social-support norm predicted perceptions of social loafing. A significant three-way interaction between task cohesion, social cohesion, and performance norm emerged. The analysis showed that the combination of high social cohesion, low task cohesion, and low team norms seems to underlie perceptions of social loafing.

Keywords: *group cohesion; team cohesion; perceived social loafing*

In the literature, teamwork has most often been associated with positive effects regarding individuals' efforts and performance. Studies have shown that teamwork leads to increased effort and performance, less absenteeism, and reduced turnover (Cohen, Ledford, & Spreitzer, 1996; Prapavessis & Carron, 1997; Wellins, Byham, & Dixon, 1994; Wisner & Feist, 2001). On the other hand, research also show that when people pool their contributions

into group work, they achieve less than might be expected based on the sum of their individual abilities (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974; Karau & Williams, 1993; Steiner, 1972). One explanation for a reduction in potential productivity is loss of motivation. This reduction in motivation and effort when individuals work collectively, compared when they work individually, is described as social loafing (Williams, Harkin, & Latané, 1986). Whereas several factors have been identified that can moderate social loafing, recent studies have suggested that in the shadow of the behavioral dimension, limited attention has been paid to group members' perception of social loafing and the subsequent consequences of this phenomenon (Mulvey & Klein, 1998). According to Mulvey and Klein (1998), perceived social loafing reflects individuals' assessment of their teammates' efforts. Group members' identification of loafing (whether justified) among their teammates has shown the potential to reduce motivation and effort among the evaluators and ultimately to reduce team performance.

In research on group dynamics, group cohesion and group norms have been identified as key factors exerting considerable influence on team performance (Carless & DePaola, 2000; Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Kim, 1995; Langfred, 1998). Regardless of the relationship between these variables, little work has been carried out to investigate the effect of group cohesion and group norms on perceived social loafing in sport. At present, no studies have succeeded in identifying factors that prevent the perception of social loafing. The purpose of the present study is to investigate perceived social loafing in relation to cohesion and team norm.

Whereas social loafing refers to an actual reduction in effort in an individual's contribution to a group, perceived loafing refers to a group member's assessment of other group members' contribution to the team (Mulvey & Klein, 1998). Perceived loafing may reflect actual reduced effort among others, but perceived loafing and actual reduced effort may not always covary. This means that perception of social loafing may occur regardless of actual loafing. Whether or not the perception is based on fact, it is possible that the perception may have a negative effect on the group member's motivation. If social loafing is perceived, athletes may reduce their effort or their contribution to the team to avoid the sucker role. The team members reduce their effort to match the level they think other members are expending. They don't want to be a sucker by working harder than the others. Support for the sucker effect was

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found in a study conducted by Kerr (1983), where people who believed that they were teamed with competent, but underperforming, partners were more likely to exert less effort. Similarly, Høigaard and Ommundsen (2005) determined that athletes exerted less effort if they believed their teammates were not doing their best. This reduction was significantly stronger in a performance-oriented climate than in a mastery-oriented climate.

As noted earlier, perceived social loafing may occur as a result of true identification of loafing among teammates. On the other hand, it may also arise as a result of an altered internal relationship in the group. According to theories of group cohesion (Carron, Colman, et al., 2002) and theories of group norms (Goodman, Ravlin, & Schminke, 1987), it is reasonable to assume that group cohesion and performance-related group norms may inhibit an athlete's perception of social loafing.

In contrast to perceived social loafing, group cohesion has been considered a key variable in models of group effectiveness and performance. In the field of sport psychology, cohesion is most often defined as "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of members' affective needs" (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213). Based on this definition, Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer (2002) categorized *cohesion* in two major groups: (a) group integration (GI): a member's perception of the group as total; and (b) individual attraction to group (ATG): a member's personal attraction to the group. According to Carron, Brawley et al. (2002) both GI and ATG fuse the members of the group and connect them to the group. Both the individual's perception of being integrated in the group, and the individual's attraction to the group, can be assessed through a task perspective and a social perspective. Although the task perspective focuses on how well each individual is integrated in the task of the group and how much he or she is attracted to the task of the group, the social perspective focuses on how well the individual is integrated in the group socially and how well he or she is attracted by the social life of the group. According to this, cohesion can be assessed through four unique constructs: (a) group integration–social (GI–S), (b) group integration–task (GI–T), (c) individual attraction to the group–social (ATG–S), and (d) individual attraction to the group–task (ATG–T). The distinction between task and social cohesion has proved to be important to understand cohesion and also in relation to the consequences that cohesion has on group performance (Cota, Longman, Evans, Dion, & Kilik, 1995; Mullen & Copper, 1994). In a meta-analysis of cohesion and performance in sports teams conducted by Carron, Colman, et al. (2002), both task cohesion and social cohesion were associated with effort and performance. This is in contrast to Mullen and Coppers (1994)

findings, which showed that only commitment to the task of the group proved to be significantly related to performance. Although there are some equivocal findings in the research on cohesion and performance, Carron, Colman, et al. (2002) stated that group cohesion in general has a positive effect on an individual's contribution to a group.

In contrast to group cohesion that should be associated with group members' integration and commitment to the task and to the group per se, group norms can be defined as "standards that regulate group members' behaviour" (Forsyth, 1999, p. 121). According to Forsyth (1999), a group norm represents a common expectation regarding each member's contribution to the team. Group norms have been shown to have a great impact on how group members perceive and interact with one another, and they appear to contribute toward stabilizing the group structure (Wheelan, 1994). When the norms are agreed on and validated as appropriate, they have been shown to increase team effectiveness (Hackman, 1976; Mullen & Copper, 1994). According to Munroe, Eastabrooks, Dennis, and Carron (1999), "Groups do not establish norms around every conceivable behaviour or situation. Rather, norms evolve around matters that are considered most important" (p. 171). Research has demonstrated that in sports, norms for competition are positively associated with team success (Kim, 1995; Munroe et al., 1999), and despite the multitude of norms that can develop in team work, it is reasonable to believe that in competitive sports, norms that are related to the effort, tasks, and standards of performance should be considered as most important. Munroe et al. stated that work ethic and team behavior are central components for team norms in competition.

In addition to the main effects of group norms as stated earlier, group norms are also identified as moderators in the cohesion-performance relationship (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Langfred, 1998; Mullen & Copper, 1994). In a study of military units, Langfred (1998) found that units with high cohesion but low standards of norm for performance (high and low) were less productive than units with high scores for cohesion and high performance norms (high and high). Langfred summarized that "a more cohesive group influences its members in whatever directions the norms are oriented" (p. 129). In an examination of work-group effectiveness, Goodman et al. (1987) stated that "norm and cohesiveness are the two central social-psychological concepts in a model of group effectiveness. Cohesiveness captures the energy and effort members will allocate to the group task, and norms identify the ways to channel this effort" (p. 151). Carron (1993) also claimed that high cohesion and high norms should lead to the best performance; high cohesion and low norms should lead to the worst performance, and low cohesion with high or low norms should lead to intermediate levels

of performance. In general, when the interaction effect between cohesion and norm has been investigated, cohesion has been measured as a 1-dimensional construct. It may be reasonable, based on research on the relationship between cohesion and performance (see Carron, Colman, et al., 2002), that the moderator effect of performance norms on perceived social loafing will depend on different combinations of social cohesion and task cohesion.

The primary aim of the study was to explore the relationship between group cohesion, group norms, and perceived social loafing. The second aim of the study was to analyze the effect of socially oriented group cohesion variables, task oriented group cohesion variables, and performance norms on the players' perception of social loafing. In this analysis, the interactive relationship between task cohesion, social cohesion, and performance norms would be emphasized.

Method

Participants

The participants were 118 male competitive junior soccer players from 12 different teams playing in the junior league. They ranged in age from 15.5 to 19.6 years of age ($M = 17.5$ years, $SD = 0.8$ years). The number of participants per team ranged from 5 to 18 with an average of 6.5 players per team. Players who had played for less than 6 months with the team were excluded from the study. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Instrument

Perceived social loafing. The Perceived Social Loafing Questionnaire (Høigaard, 2002) was used to assess the athletes' perception of loafing in the teams. The Perceived Social Loafing Questionnaire consists of five items, such as "Members in my team are contributing less than I anticipated." The five items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Higher scores indicate higher degree of perceived social loafing. A principal component analysis resulted in one single factor solution. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was estimated to .74.

Cohesion. Group cohesiveness data were collected using the Group Environmental Questionnaire (GEQ; Carron, Brawley, et al., 2002). The

GEQ contains 18 items measuring four components of cohesion: (a) A member's ATG-T is composed of four items (e.g., "I am unhappy with my team's level of desire to win"); (b) A member's ATG-S is composed of five items (e.g., "Some of my best friends are on this team"); (c) A member's GI-T is composed of five items (e.g., "Our team is united in trying to reach its goals for performance"); and (d) A member's GI-S is composed of four items (e.g., "Our team would like to spend time together in the off-season"). The items are scaled on a 9-point, frequency-based, Likert-type scale. The mean scores of each scale are derived independently, but in all cases, higher scores indicate perceptions of higher cohesiveness. Several studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of the GEQ (Brawley, Carron, & Widmeyer, 1987, 1988; Li & Hammer, 1996). In this study, the Cronbach's alphas for the four GEQ factors were .76 for ATG-S, .62 for ATG-T, .68 for GI-T, and .80 for GI-S. To improve the alpha value for ATG-T and GI-T, one item was excluded from each of the two subscales resulting in .65 and .74, respectively.

Team norm for competitions. The Team Sport Competition Norm Questionnaire (TSCNQ) was used to assess the team norm for competition (Høigaard, 2002). TSCNQ is based on the three primary components and selected categories identified by Munroe et al. (1999). TSCNQ contains a total of nine items that assess norms for competition: (a) role involvement (three items; e.g., "In my team, we accept our team role in competition"), (b) supportive behavior (three items; e.g., "In my team, we support teammates when they fail"), and (c) productivity (three items; e.g., "In my team, we don't give up during adversity in a competition"). Item responses were recorded on a Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (9). Higher scores indicate a stronger commitment to the actual norm. To validate the categorical construct, a principal component analysis was conducted. The factor solution confirmed the construct supporting the following factor structure: (a) role involvement ($\alpha = .82$), (b) supportive behavior ($\alpha = .69$), and (c) productivity ($\alpha = .73$). The solution accounted for 70% of the variance.

According to the second aim of this study, which focused on possible interaction effects between performance norms, task cohesion, and social cohesion on perceived social loafing, the subscales of task cohesion, social cohesion, and performance norms were merged into composite scores. In line with prior research (Gardner, Shields, Bredemeier, & Bostrom, 1996; Shields, Gardner, Bredemeier, & Bostrom, 1997), the two subscales measuring task cohesion (AGT-T and GI-T) were merged into a single composite

Task Cohesion Scale ($\alpha = .79$); the two subscales measuring social cohesion (ATG-S and GI-S) were merged into a single composite Social Cohesion Scale ($\alpha = .80$), and the three subscales measuring performance norms were merged into a single variable labeled composite Performance Norm Scale ($\alpha = .78$).

Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the variables are reported in Table 1. As shown a negative relationship between all cohesion subscales and perception of social loafing was found. Moreover, the analysis indicated a more negative relationship between the subscales of task cohesion (ATG-T and GI-T), and perceived social loafing ($-.48$ and $p < .01$, and $-.52$ and $p < .01$) compared to the relationship between the subscales of social cohesion (ATG-S and GI-S), and perceived social loafing ($-.21$ and $p < .05$, and $-.22$ and $p < .05$). Finally, the table shows that all three performance norms are negatively related to perceived social loafing.

To examine the effect of the socially oriented cohesion variables (ATG-S and GI-S), the task-oriented cohesion variables (ATG-T and GI-T), and the three performance norm variables (productivity, role involvement, supportive behavior) on the players' perception of social loafing, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The result of this analysis is presented in Table 2. The analysis showed that the four cohesion scales and the three performance-norm scales accounted for 44% (R^2) of the variance in perceived social loafing. As can be seen in Table 2, the predictor variable indicating players' attraction to the group by task (ATG-T) was the only predictor among the cohesion scales that showed a significant effect on the dependent variable ($\beta = -.19$). The negative beta indicates a negative linear relationship between task attraction to the group and the perception of social loafing. From the subscales indicating perception of performance norms, both productivity norms ($\beta = -.20$) and social support norms ($\beta = -.17$) appeared to have a similar negative effect on the perception of social loafing among teammates. The regression analysis is not in line with the hypothesis arguing that cohesion variables in general, or performance norms in general, will affect the perception of social loafing. However, the regression analysis confirms that a task-based attraction to the group has an inhibiting effect on the perception of social loafing and that productivity norm and norms for supportive behavior parallel this influence. According to the regression, social cohesion may, in the best case, play an interactive role.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Between All Main Variables

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Perceived social loafing ^a	118	2.05	0.67	-.21*	-.48**	-.52**	-.22*	-.48**	-.48**	-.42**	-.58**	-.25**	-.60**
2. Individual attraction to the group-social ^b	118	6.85	1.44		.32**	.28**	.42**	.12	.20*	.20*	.35**	.81**	.23*
3. Individual attraction to the group-task ^b	118	6.88	1.50			.48**	.16	.44**	.39**	.28**	.87**	.27**	.47**
4. Group integration-task ^b	118	6.59	1.46				.25**	.45**	.50**	.48**	.86**	.31**	.62**
5. Group integration-social ^b	118	5.73	1.75					.04	.04	.23*	.24**	.88**	.16
6. Norm for productivity ^b	118	7.22	1.33						.54**	.26**	.52**	.09	.75**
7. Norm for role involvement ^b	117	7.73	1.13							.33**	.51**	.14	.76**
8. Norm for supportive behavior ^b	117	6.07	1.76								.44**	.25**	.77**
9. Task cohesion ^b	118	6.73	1.27									.34**	.63**
10. Social cohesion ^b	118	6.30	1.35										.22**
11. Performance norms ^b	118	7.01	1.07										

a. Assessed on a scale range from 1 to 5.

b. Assessed on a scale range from 1 to 9.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis With Perceived Social Loafing
as Dependent Variable ($N = 116$)

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>
Individual attraction to the group–social	.01	.04	.02	0.19
Individual attraction to the group–task	–.09	.04	–.19	–2.20*
Group integration–social	–.04	.03	–.10	–1.28
Group integration–task	–.07	.04	–.15	–1.58
Norm for productivity	–.10	.05	–.20	–2.15*
Norm for role involvement	–.100	.05	–.17	–1.84
Norm for supportive behavior	–.06	.03	–.17	–1.99*
<i>Df</i>	7			
<i>F</i>	12.19***			
<i>R</i> ²	.44			

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

To reveal possible interaction effects between task cohesion, social cohesion, and performance norms on the perception of social loafing and thus extend previous studies, the complexity of the independent variables had to be reduced (see the procedure described in the Method section). Multiple regression analyses, with composite variables (task cohesion, social cohesion, and performance norm) and interactions terms, were run with perceived social loafing as the dependent variable. For interaction analysis purposes, all independent variables were centered prior to the construction of the interaction terms. Centering the variables on their mean reduces multicollinearity that may otherwise result from high correlation between the first-order terms and the interaction terms (Jacard, Turissi, & Wan, 1990). The centering procedure does not affect the regression coefficient of the interaction. Furthermore, it allow also for a more meaningful interpretation of the regression coefficient as each represents the relationship between the first-order predictor and the criterion variables at the mean level rather than at a less meaningful level (i.e., 0) for other predictors (Aiken & West, 1991). The regression analyses are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, both task cohesion and performance norms revealed a significant negative main effect on the dependent variable. Altogether, the three composite variables accounted for 43% of the variance in perceived social loafing. In addition, the regression analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction effect (Task cohesion \times Social cohesion \times Performance norm) on perceived social loafing.

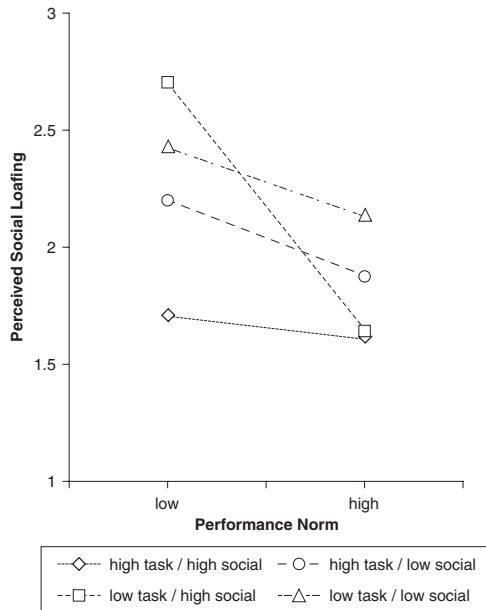
Table 3
Multiple Regression Analysis With Perceived Social Loafing
as Dependent Variable on Composite Variable Task Cohesion,
Social Cohesion, and Performance Norm ($N = 116$)

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>
Social cohesion	-.07	.04	-.13	-1.50
Task cohesion	-.17	.05	-.32	-3.25*
Performance norm	-.28	.06	-.45	-4.68***
Social cohesion \times Task cohesion \times Performance norm	.05	.02	.21	2.08*
<i>Df</i>	7			
<i>F</i>	13.74***			
<i>R</i> ²	.43			

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

In an applied setting, a visual perspective of interaction effects is considered as imperative, yet the complexity of a three-way interaction revealed in a regression analysis makes it difficult to visualize. Thus, to visualize how the three independent variables actually interact, the three interacting variables (Table 3) were dichotomised using a median split to ensure equal numbers of participants in each category compared. The dichotomised variables were then analyzed with an ANOVA using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design. The result of this analysis is shown in Figure 1. It is emphasized that Figure 1 represents a reduction of the results presented in the previous regression analysis and that it is developed for the purpose of visualizing only. The figure reveals how high and low performance norms interact with the four combinations of cohesion (high task and high social; high task and low social; low task and high social; low task and low social) on perceived social loafing. As Figure 1 shows, the combination of high task and high social cohesion gives a low perception of social loafing whether the performance norms are high ($M = 1.62$) or low ($M = 1.71$). However, when social cohesion remains high, but the task cohesion becomes low, only the performance norms seem to be able to moderate the effect; when the task cohesion becomes low and the performance norms remain high, the perception of loafing is hardly affected ($M = 1.64$), but when the task cohesion becomes low together with the performance norms, the perception of loafing increases by approximately 65% ($M = 2.70$).

Figure 1
Mean Scores Showing Perception of Social Loafing
by Task Cohesion, Social Cohesion, and Performance Norms



Note: Perceived social loafing was assessed on a scale range from 1 to 5.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between a multidimensional measurement of group cohesion and performance norms, in relation to perceived social loafing. The study was carried out among junior soccer players playing junior league in Norway. The results showed that all subscales of cohesion and all subscales of performance norms correlate with perceived social loafing. These results are in line with previous research, which has indicated that each of the GEQ subscales has a separate and meaningful pattern of correlation with variables that are important to group function and effectiveness (Carron, Colman, et al., 2002). The results are also in line with

studies that have concluded that high levels of performance norm are related to better performance (Kim, 1995).

However, the regression analyses performed in the study revealed a more nuanced picture of the relationship between cohesion, norms, and perception of social loafing. The analysis revealed that all cohesion and norm variables in combination accounted for 44% of the variance. However, only task-oriented attraction to the group (ATG-T), productivity norms, and social support norms emerged as significant predictors in relation to perceived social loafing. Based on the significant effect of group members' attraction to the group, it is reasonable to emphasize that ATG-T, among other things, measures athletes' perception of the opportunities for skills development provided by the team (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985). It is reasonable to assume that if this option is perceived by the athlete and is in accordance with the athlete's preferences, it may lead to an increase in intrinsic motivation and a consequent decrease in social comparison. A possible consequence of this will be less focus on others and thus a reduced perception of social loafing among teammates and perhaps even less actual social loafing by the athlete himself. This is to some extent in line with the study of Boone and Beitel (1997) that identified ATG-T as a highly important dimension relating to team success.

With regard to the effect of performance-related norms on perceived social loafing, this study confirmed that both perceived productivity norms and perceived social support norms seem to inhibit the perception of social loafing. Productivity norms are related to task-oriented motivation for performance and high standards of effort. It is reasonable to assume that such motivations and standards regulate group members' behavior in the opposite direction to social comparison and thus reduce perception of social loafing among others. Social-support norms, emphasizing a high level of social support in the team, indicate a supportive atmosphere where athletes give positive feedback and support each other, under success as well as under failure. A norm emphasizing a supportive behavior creates primarily a climate that instigates the value of mastery attempt, which in the long run has an empowering effect and will increase athlete's internal motivation and self confidence. A young and relatively inexperienced player who accepts a norm of productivity yet who in some way doubts his own talent and his contribution to the team will probably know that he or she will be supported and guided by the coach as well as his or her team if he or she perceives a basic supportive norm. When giving and receiving support is instigated as a key value for the group's performance, it is probably more

difficult to focus on social loafing, to look for social loafers among teammates, or to become a social loafer oneself.

The analysis in this study—which examined the total effect of social cohesion, task cohesion, and group norms on perceived social loafing—supported prior analysis showing that task cohesion and performance norms have a relatively stronger effect on perceived social loafing compared to social cohesion. In addition to the main effects, the analysis revealed interesting interaction effects in line with prior research. The three-way interaction showed that when high social cohesion is combined with low task cohesion and the performance norm is low, the level of perceived social loafing is at its highest. However, when an increase in performance norm occurs, the level of perceived social loafing decreases radically and appears at its lowest level in conjunction with the combination of a high level of task cohesion and a high level of social cohesion.

Assuming that perceived social loafing indicates actual social loafing in a group, these findings are in line with earlier studies that indicate that performance norms moderate the relationship between cohesion and team performance (Carron, 1993; Langfred, 1998). Langfred (1998) states that “groups with high cohesiveness and task norms were more effective than other groups and the combination of high cohesiveness and non-task norms was associated with poor performances” (p. 138).

In general, these findings confirm that different aspects of cohesion and performance-related norms are important in relation to perceived social loafing. They also suggest that social cohesion and task cohesion interact with performance norms and may give a more detailed understanding and explanation of the perceived social loafing phenomenon.

Further research is needed to replicate these findings under different conditions. There is a need to validate the results from this study in relation to real or actual social loafing and actual performance. Studies that include personality variables should also be conducted, and there is a need to elaborate on the relationship between the phenomenon of social comparison and perceived social loafing. It is not obvious that perceived loafing or actual loafing is driven exclusively by environmental factors. A study that includes and controls for personality variables will probably give a more detailed understanding of cohesion, team norms, social loafing, and the relationships between these variables.

From an applied perspective, the results of this study have implications for teambuilding. To increase effort and performance, teambuilding needs to highlight different aspects of cohesion in combination with performance norms

rather than focus on social activity or cohesion in an isolated perspective. Social support seems to be an important factor regarding teams' performances, but a one-sided focus on the social aspect in a team may be counterproductive for the team. Given that a variety of methods exist to increase group cohesiveness and given that cohesiveness has the potential to increase effort or enhance performance, it is important to bear in mind the negative effect of low performance norms combined with high degree of social cohesion.

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