

MASONIC LOAFING

DO MANY HANDS REALLY MAKE LIGHT WORK?

John W. Bizzack

Maximilien Ringelmann, a French agricultural engineer, was interested in agricultural efficiency, primarily the conditions under which draft animals such as horses and oxen—and men—are more or less efficient in their work performance.¹

In the 1880s, he conducted experiments at the agricultural school of Grand-Jouan in southeastern France, leading to one of the earliest discoveries in the history of social psychology. Some described Ringelmann to be described as a founder of social psychology.²

His copious notes, unpublished until 1913, document how he organized and conducted the research. He asked participants to pull as hard as they could on a rope, alone and then in groups of two, three, and eight in an experimental tug of war.

Ringelmann concluded, based on the experiments, that, on average, groups of three exerted only two and a half times as much force as an individual working alone.

Groups of eight exerted less than four times the force of a single person.³ As Ringelmann added more people to the rope, he discovered that the total force generated by the group continued to rise. However, the average force exerted by each group member declined.

The findings, known as *the Ringelmann Effect*, explain the social psychology phenomenon of low performance and reduced productivity in large groups and organizations, which Ringelmann called *social loafing*.

We find from several studies conducted after Ringelmann's that the prevalent cause of social loafing is the lack of understanding of individual contributions, unchallenging tasks given to people in a group, low



¹ F. Uekoetter, *The Strange Career of the Ringelmann Smoke Chart*. Environ Monit Assess 106, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-005-0756-z>

² Saul, Kassin, Steven Fein, Hazel Rose Markus, *Social Psychology* Front Cover, 10th ed., Boston, MA, Cengage Learning, February 22, 2016, 12–13.

³ Ingham, A. G., Levinger, G., Graves, J., & Peckham, "Ringelmann Effect: Studies Of Group Size And Group Performance," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, 1974, 371-38. (Ringelmann acknowledged two potential reasons underlying this decrement of individual performance when working in groups. The first was that the effect was caused by coordination losses. For example, two people pulling on a rope would be more coordinated in their pulling (more likely to be in sync in their pulling) than would a group of seven or eight people putting together. For Ringelmann, this was the most likely explanation. Nonetheless, he also acknowledged the fact that such an effect might be the result of decreased motivation. For example, with more people pulling on a rope, individuals may feel that the work of their coworkers will be enough to successfully accomplish the task at hand, thus individual effort decreases as the result).

personal satisfaction from the task, and a lack of unity in purpose (Freemasonry?).⁴ Additionally, loafers in large groups and organizations feel their contributions will not be noticed, thus making them also think their efforts are unnecessary.

When an individual believes the goal of a large group is easily attainable and very valuable, motivation to perform is highest. The motivation was lowest when the goal seemed impossible or considered unimportant (Freemasonry?).⁵ The “lost in the crowd” feeling caused people to believe their efforts would not be rewarded even if they put them forth.⁶

The research points to the reality that when a project has a personal meaning to participants, they are more involved and not inclined to loaf. And as logically follows, when enthusiasm for the overall collective, goal or task is diminished, the overall contribution will drop (Freemasonry?).⁷

WHAT RINGELMANN'S RESEARCH ALSO TELLS US

When we hear or say that something is large, massive, or gigantic in America, it often seems to be not just an observation but a commendation.

Despite the research, we remain predisposed to the notion that large groups and organizations represent strength, which also implies success. That supposition, of course, is largely subjective and labors under the influence of our individual frames of reference, feelings, opinions, and the influence of advertising/marketing, which also fuels the general assumption that *bigger is better*.

Few will argue that *bigness* may have its place in certain situations. Still, its pervasiveness elevates bigness to what seems to be a virtuous status. We do not know how much bigness is enough, so why would we not presume that bigger *is* better?⁸

Volunteer groups and organizations are also affected by the bigger is better thinking. When they falter or fail, the culprit usually relates to how a volunteer group or organization provides meaning and value to the people who give their time and talent to the purpose and cause (Freemasonry?).⁹

Formal studies of the success and failures of volunteer organizations have limitations because that area has not been as broadly researched and examined as financially profit-making organizations. However, once we learn what commonly leads to stumbling and failures in those organizations, we see curious similarities to the all-volunteer membership and organization of Freemasonry.

Failure in organizational accountability is often identified as one of the reasons for stumbling and failures.¹⁰

⁴ Michael Aamodt, *Industrial/Organizational Psychology: An Applied Approach*, Cengage Learning; 8th edition, 2016.

⁵ D.R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, New York, Wadsworth, 2009.

⁶ Bibb Latané, Kippling Williams, Stephen Harkins, (1979). "Many Hands Make Light The Work: The Causes And Consequences Of Social Loafing," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 822–832.

⁷ Ashley Simms, Tommy Nichols, Social Loafing: A Review of the Literature, http://www.na-businesspress.com/JMPP/NicholsT_Web15_1_.pdf, accessed June 2021.

⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale Revisited: A New Look at the Classic Case for a Decentralist Future*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017.

⁹ Theodore H. Poister, *Managing and Measuring Performance in Public and Nonprofit Organizations: An Integrated Approach*, Jossey-Bass; 2nd edition, 2014.

¹⁰ Poister, and, *Managing and Measuring Performance in Public and Nonprofit Organizations: An Integrated Approach*, Jossey-Bass; 2nd edition, 2014, Forbe's Nonprofit Council, "13 Practical Ways To Improve Your Aid Organization's Accountability, October 19, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2020/10/19/13-practical-ways-to-improve-your-aid-organizations-accountability/?sh=5cc72ef2136e>, accessed Jun 30, 2021.

Failure may also be related to how or if a group recognizes, properly quantifies, and measures performance (Freemasonry?).¹¹

An additional interesting finding is that when a volunteer organization fails, the cause is often related to a clear disconnect between an individual's motivation to volunteer and how the group or organization leads and manages the work of its cadre of supporters (Freemasonry?).¹²

Freemasonry is intended to appeal to men seeking self-improvement under the Fraternity's philosophies, features, and practices. Thus, the process differs from other community-volunteer groups designed to raise awareness and money for specific causes.

However, Freemasonry does provide relief to others. Freemasonry's role as a public charity is believed by many, including Masons, to be the Fraternity's *primary* purpose.¹³ This mistaken notion is amplified by the various ways the Fraternity is characterized on the Internet.¹⁴ Although most Masonic sites attempt to explain that Freemasonry is not a charity, many highlight the amount and kind of charity work performed by Freemasonry. This association compounds the misperception by the public (and, unfortunately, Masons) about whether the Fraternity is a charity-driven organization. The factual reasons for the incorrect assumption can be found elsewhere but are not explored in this book.

Many members of the Fraternity ignored the reality that bigger is not necessarily better and *only better* is better. Also unheeded is that if the desirable goal is to become a bigger organization, that goal must be rooted in the intent to *be better*, not just bigger, and it must be possible to manage that growth responsibly.

The trick, of course, is defining and measuring *better*. Suppose in Freemasonry, we define better as acquiring more revenue. In that case, with more square footage, a high membership count, new projects and programs, and how many meetings and fundraisers are held (all of which are easily measured), the organization has succeeded in this area at specific times in its history. Unfortunately, that method of measurement faces a problem. For example, after a gain, especially rapid membership increases, there is a significant decline. This is a troubling reality for those who might defend that particular definition of *better*, especially today when we clearly see that membership has steadily plummeted over the past six decades under that measurement method.

When we consider that 56 percent of all men who are currently on the rolls of subordinate Lodges have never meaningfully participated in the activities of their Lodge since having received their most recent degree, we are forced to face the reality that unless the operational strategy is to admit as many men as possible into the ranks (then hope for the best when it comes to retention), we can hardly claim that bigger is *better*.¹⁵

American Freemasonry has been and continues to be a sobering example of the Ringelmann Effect.

¹¹ B.G. Peters, John Pierre, J. *Handbook of Public Administration*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2003.

¹² Leslie R. Crutchfield, *How Change Happens: Why Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Don't*, Wiley, 1st Edition, 2018. John Tyler, *Transparency in Philanthropy: An Analysis of Accountability, Fallacy, and Volunteerism*, Smart Plug, 2013. Jan 1, 2013

¹³ *Characteristics of an Ideal Lodge, Survey Results & Analysis*, October 1, 2019, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky, 2.

¹⁴ Jessica Pearce Rotondi, "Seven Things You May Not Know About Freemasons What Are Those Symbols All About, Anyway?" History.Com, December 9, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/freemasons-facts-symbols-handshake-meaning>, accessed June 20, 2021, (Freemasons are a social and philanthropic organization meant to make its members lead more virtuous and socially oriented lives," says Margaret Jacob, professor of history at University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*).

¹⁵ *IBID*.

MASONIC LOAFING

As demonstrated by over 100 years of credible and compelling research, social loafing does not just happen when groups perform physical activities like rope pulling.

While all subsequent findings from later research and experiments stemming from Ringelmann's 1913 work tell us how people react and respond to tasks in large groups and organizations, one aspect is especially interesting. If someone feels that others in the group are slacking off or that others will loaf, that person will lower their effort to match that of the others (Freemasonry?).¹⁶

We can better understand, at least in part, why most of the membership in the American Masonic Fraternity is not and has not been actively engaged in the work of their Fraternity. We can learn why by examining research about low performance and reduced productivity in large groups and organizations.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

When people ignore something enormous and obvious because it is uncomfortable or personally, socially or politically embarrassing, controversial, and even inflammatory, we have the metaphorical idiom, the *elephant in the room*, to describe it. One such elephant in the room of American Freemasonry is *leadership*.

As the Fraternity unfolded in America, the idea of formal titles began to suggest that the men who held them automatically possessed all the knowledge and skills to make them effective leaders. Many past (and current) writings about leadership in the Fraternity hardly support that notion.

Most Masons know good men who ascend to official positions of influence and hold impressive titles but make, at best, mediocre leaders for various reasons. One is that they often see leadership as something that confers privilege and gives power instead of imposing accountability and responsibility.



Attention was called directly to the elephant in the room by Arkansas Past Grand Master, Houston A. Brian, during a presentation at the Southwestern Conference on Masonic Education in 1969, which means the problem he pointed out had been a problem for many years prior. Houston said, "In many instances, Masonry is using for its leaders brethren who would not be accepted for leadership anywhere else."¹⁷ As expected, this cutting assessment by the Grand Master drew ire and agreement from many in the current and past leadership positions and members. As the idiom, "If the shoe fits, wear it," implies, if something has all of the characteristics of a thing, it probably is that thing.

Compounding the problem that Brian so clearly identified is that any practical, constructive resolution offered at least since 1969, continues to be up against a seemingly unbending culture with a big head start in forming

¹⁶ Latané, Williams, Harkins.

¹⁷ Houston A. Brian, *Attracting Masonic Leaders*, Grand Lodge of Louisiana, <https://la-mason.com/shorttalk/attracting-masonic-leaders>, accessed June 29, 2021.

a seemingly impenetrable, granite-like status quo belief when it comes to how the Fraternity typically selects its leaders. That head start is traceable to the *bigger is better* notion and the toll that the periods of unbridled, rapid expansion in membership and Lodges have taken on American Freemasonry.

Evidence proves the bigger is better idea flourished in jurisdictions from the 1800s into the 1820s, then again in the 1850s through the end of the century. A surge of membership in the early 1920s, then again from 1943 through 1959, fueled and ingrained the bigger is better notion in the Fraternity.¹⁸

A review of the many Grand Lodge Proceedings during those periods shows the Fraternity and its leadership were drunk on the idea that bigger is better while disregarding scale and arrogantly assuming that whatever they were doing at the time was enough to retain all those they admitted. Membership “gains” were proudly paraded as *the* measurement of the Fraternity’s success, and attempting to quantify Freemasonry in that way merely weakened the Fraternity.

As the get-bigger-then-decline cycle since the early 1800s shows, calling for more members, then, once achieved, witnessing a decline in membership, and then calling for more members again without regard to why members are not retained is an exceptionally poor growth strategy.

Finding Masonic leaders, scholars, researchers, commentators, or general writers about Freemasonry, in the past (or today) who speak *against* the proliferation of Freemasonry in the United States is challenging. However, it is common to find the same group who were, and remain today, staunchly opposed to the *unbridled rapid expansion* of membership just to become a bigger organization. Doubters of that reality might also wish to *re-search* whatever they rely on to believe otherwise.

Brian’s 1969 statement about leadership in the Fraternity seems more easily understood by non-Masons than many members. Each time the West Gate was opened to accommodate rapid admittance, the organization was diluted by the influx of B and C candidates. Most (then and today) represent the findings from Ringelmann’s experiment. Unsurprisingly, the B and C members were admitted in such mass that they eventually became the majority, and many ascended to influential and official leadership positions. Inevitably, various organizational problems developed as they naturally do when leadership responsibilities are assumed by or thrust upon men who are not prepared for them.¹⁹

Allowing mediocre leadership or substandard performance to persist while in a position of official leadership assassinated (or, at the minimum, derailed) the original 1723 concept and Charge outlined in Andersons Constitution (“Therefore, no Master or Warden is chosen by Seniority, but for his Merit”²⁰). Over the years, doing otherwise hobbled subsequent efforts to firmly establish a widespread, uniform foothold in the Fraternity of that original Charge. While the idea that every member deserves a chance to sit in principle officer chairs regardless of merit may be admirable, at least in theory. It has yet to prove so effective that it has revolutionized management and leadership principles worldwide.

Allowing mediocre leadership or substandard performance while in a position of official leadership to persist, assassinated (or at the minimum, derailed) the original 1723 concept and Charge set forth in Andersons Constitution (“Therefore, no Master or Warden is chosen by Seniority, but for his Merit”)

¹⁸ John W. Bizzack, *Island Freemasonry: The Final Bastion of the Observant Lodge*, Macoy, 2017, and *Sins Of Our Masonic Fathers: The Lost Strength of Fewness in American Freemasonry*, BSF Foundation, 2019.

¹⁹ Laurence J. Peter, Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong*, Bantam, 1969. (Among its primary theories are that promotion decisions often are based on candidates’ performance in current roles, not necessarily on the skills needed in their future or management/leadership roles, and that good workers are not always the best candidates for certain management/leadership positions).

²⁰ *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, The Charges of a Free-Mason, IV. Of Masters and Wardens, Fellows and Apprentices, 1723 and 1734.

Today, the interaction between what we might think of as the “suppliers” of Freemasonry (Lodges) and the “buyers” of that resource (prospective petitioners and members) is as lopsided as the idea that bigger is better.²¹ It can be convincingly argued that the “supply,” so to speak, of Freemasonry today outdistances the demand.²²

In metaphorical terms, if we have plenty of Freemasonry to offer and the demand for it is low, the value placed on Freemasonry by those possibly inclined to pursue membership will continue to fall until the demand increases.

The level of public awareness of Freemasonry is currently at an all-time low. Since Freemasonry draws its members from the public, realistically, how can we expect a significant demand (much less a surge of interest in the Fraternity) until there is sufficient awareness of what the Fraternity offers? More importantly, we must question whether, even *if* there were an unanticipated, significant demand, the Fraternity could satisfy such an appetite by candidates with existing practices in many Lodges.

DIFFERENT RESULTS?

Should we expect different results today if we continue to treat problems at the surface without understanding the root cause, much less designing workable solutions that effectively and consistently confront the formidable task of adjusting, recalibrating, and successfully correcting problems?

Nearly every Grand Jurisdiction in the United States offers a leadership program of some design and has for decades. It cannot be said that such programs have not worked, at least to some degree, over the past two generations, but neither can it be said that they have *effectively* addressed the elephant in the room over the past forty years or more because most of the programs treat only the surface problem—not the problem that Past Grand Master Brian pointed out in 1969.

When turnover in businesses or membership loss in voluntary organizations strikes, it is common to find the cause misdiagnosed. The initial response by those left to deal with the aftermath of such shrinking is often the false contention that turnover/member loss means the employee or member was not a good fit anyway. If we dig a little deeper, we find that is not necessarily the answer, at least not in every case.

Are there those who come to Freemasonry, then leave or fade away because of bad management and leadership? We find that most people leave their positions because of the leadership in their organization. One example found in a more than one-million-person poll based on exit interviews (something Lodges and Grand Lodges have never made a habit of doing, and if so, have never released the data) tells another story. Corresponding research shows that the largest variance in predicting a person’s performance is their

²¹ “A Public Awareness Campaign For 2022,” an unpublished white paper, prepared for Right Worshipful James Gibson, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, March 24, 2021, (The purpose of the survey accompanying the white paper was to collect data from which to identify existing community programs and the interest level of the survey population on a proposed Grand Lodge initiative to generate positive public awareness of the Freemasonry, the fraternity in general, and subordinate lodges. The overall confidence level of this 976-respondent sample is 95% with a 3% margin of error. Although not every respondent answered each survey question, the responses provided a reasonable basis for analysis. Results imply the highly questionable notion that charity and community service is the principle purpose of the fraternity not merely one aspect, and that members continue to suggest that the solution to issues facing today’s fraternity are solvable by simple increasing membership).

²² Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013, (In 1890, Marshall’s, *Principles of Economics*, developed a supply-and-demand curve that is still used to demonstrate the point at which the market is in equilibrium. Marshall argued that supply and demand, costs of production, and price elasticity all work together).

management and leadership effectiveness.²³ Asserting that such a finding, or the million-person poll, does not also apply to Freemasonry is foolish, especially when no process demonstrates otherwise.

As an organization that is supposed to encourage introspection, there is scarce evidence that it does so. Our factual history and documents tell us that leadership has consistently found it more comfortable to address the small parts of bigger problems. Just as the crew of the Titanic that did not see the part of the iceberg that ripped the fatal hole in the ship, too much of Masonic leadership has, for various reasons, taken little notice or even looked, at times, at what lays quietly below the water line.

QUANTIFYING MASONIC LOAFING

In the 1960s, British physicist, historian of science, and information scientist Derek John De Solla Price analyzed the publication of scientific papers and came up with a law that essentially quantifies social, and for that matter, Masonic loafing.



He found that approximately the square root of the number of people in an organization is responsible for 50 percent of the work.²⁴ By considering Price's research and taking the square root of the number of Freemasons in the United States in 2015 (1,161,253) as reported by the Masonic Services Association of North America (although decidedly fewer members in 2023), we arrive at the number of members who are responsible for half of the work in the Fraternity: roughly 1,000 men.

Under Price's square root law, roughly 1,000 men do half the work. Another 1,000 do something that can be thought of as the other half, which means roughly 2,000 card-carrying Masons are responsible for most of the work in American Freemasonry. Those 2,000 represent 0.17 percent of the total number of reported Masons in good standing in 2015 doing what is, arguably, *all the work*.



Doubters might consider using the membership numbers of their own Lodge and then calculating the square root of that number. If truthfully analyzed, the answer will be very close to the number of men who are known to be doing roughly half the work of the Lodge. That number is likely to correspond with the members who are found to be most active, involved, and engaged regularly. You already know who they are even without using the formula.

We can only imagine how excited Maximilien Ringelmann would be to learn there is a formula to measure his law of social loafing.

²³ Research Seeks to Uncover Fundamental Truths of Workforce Behavior and Attrition Through Analysis of Big Data, Center for Human Resources at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania <https://news.wharton.upenn.edu/press-releases/2012/11/evolv-and-the-wharton-school-collaborate-to-advance-understanding-of-workforce-management-and-employee-performance>, accessed June 1, 2021 (Evolv is a corporation that harnesses the power of big data predictive analytics and machine learning to uncover and correct the inefficiencies that undermine the performance of global workforces. Businesswire, A Berkshire Hathaway Company, <https://www.businesswire.com/portal/site/home/welcome>, accessed June 1, 2021).

²⁴ Paul Travis Nicholls, "Price's Square Root Law: Empirical Validity And Relation To Lotka's Law," *Information Processing & Management*, December 1988, 469–477, (Price's square root law or Price's law pertains to the relationship between the literature on a subject and the number of authors in the subject area, stating that half of the publications come from the square root of all contributors. Thus, if 100 papers are written by 25 authors, five authors will have contributed 50 papers), Jonathan Furner, "Little Book, Big Book: Before and After Little Science, Big Science: A Review Article, Part I," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 35, no. 2 June 2003, 115–125.

USUS PROMPTOS FACIT

John Heywood, a fifteenth-century English writer, known for his plays, poems, and collection of maxims, included in one of his many books a particular proverb from the 1300s. He wrote: *many hands make light the work*. In context, the quote intends to convey that a difficult task becomes easy if enough people are involved.

Suppose the proverb is read after one becomes aware and understands the far-reaching findings of the Ringelmann Effect and all research that supports it. In that case, how many hands make *light the work* can also mean that *many hands get little work done*.

If we seek different results, we cannot expect to achieve them by doing things and leading the same way as we have any more than we can expect that just having more members is a sensible practice for any of the different results that might be sought within the Institution of American Freemasonry.

Perhaps working on the variety of problems bound to unfold in an organization as large, widespread, under-led, and profound as Freemasonry is part of the fundamental Masonic journey for its members and their elected leaders. Can such deep-seated problems that, at this stage in its long history, are entrenched into the cultural thinking be resolved in all sovereign jurisdictions in the nation for the good of the Order? Many members do not think the organization, as a whole, can come close to accomplishing that. Those who have applied themselves to the study of Freemasonry and the factual history of how it has evolved over the centuries in our country see it differently.

While there is no immediate panacea, they find in their studies that through the ages, there has been strength found in fewness in the Fraternity. While some Grand Lodges and their subordinate Lodges continue to grapple with such problems, others appear to have successes in *some* areas dealing with them. Sadly, the data shows that *all* jurisdictions have not mastered moving well beyond the comfortable aspects of addressing only the small parts of bigger problems. At least, not yet.

There is an adage we hear a lot today: *practice makes perfect*. The original maxim, *use makes perfect*, found its way into popular language between 1550 and 1560. The adage appears in the autobiography of President John Adams, where he used the Latin and correct version: *Usus promptos facit*.²⁵

Perhaps, at least at the Lodge level, we should consider adopting the meaning of the phrase in its original context: *it is the use of something that makes it perfect*, then apply ourselves to *use* Freemasonry as it was historically designed and intended.



²⁵ Jon R. Stone, *The Routledge Dictionary of Latin Quotations: The Illiterati's Guide to Latin Maxims, Mottoes, Proverbs, and Sayings*, 1st Edition, Routledge, 2004, 122.