

# People don't really like unselfish colleagues

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You know those goody-two-shoes who volunteer for every task and thanklessly take on the annoying details nobody else wants to deal with?

That's right: Other people really can't stand them.

Four separate studies led by a Washington State University social psychologist have found that unselfish workers who are the first to throw their hat in the ring are also among those that coworkers most want to, in effect, vote off the island.

"It's not hard to find examples but we were the first to show this happens and have explanations for why," said Craig Parks, lead author of "The Desire to Expel Unselfish Members from the Group" in the current [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

The phenomenon has implications for business work groups, volunteer organizations, non-profit projects, military units, and environmental efforts, an interest of Parks' coauthor and former PhD student, Asako Stone.

Parks and Stone found that unselfish colleagues come to be resented because they "raise the bar" for what is expected of everyone. As a result, workers feel the new standard will make everyone else look bad.

It doesn't matter that the overall welfare of the group or the task at hand is better served by someone's unselfish behavior, Parks said.

"What is objectively good, you see as subjectively bad," he said.

The do-gooders are also seen as deviant rule breakers. It's as if they're giving away Monopoly money so someone can stay in the game, irking other players to no end.

The studies gave participants—introductory psychology students—pools of points that they could keep or give up for an immediate reward of meal service vouchers. Participants were also told that giving up points would improve the group's chance of receiving a monetary reward.

In reality, the participants were playing in fake groups of five. Most of the fictitious four would make seemingly fair swaps of one point for each voucher, but one of the four would often make lopsided exchanges—greedily giving up no points and taking a lot of vouchers, or unselfishly giving up a lot of points and taking few [vouchers](#).

Most participants later said they would not want to work with the greedy colleague again—an expected result seen in previous studies.

But a majority of participants also said they would not want to work with the unselfish colleague again. They frequently said, "the person is making me look bad" or is breaking the rules. Occasionally, they would suspect the person had ulterior motives.

Parks said he would now like to look at how the do-gooders themselves react to being rejected. While some may indeed have ulterior motives, he said it's more likely they actually are working for the good of an organization.

Excluded from the group, they may say, "enough already" and simply give up.

"But it's also possible," he said, "that they may actually try even harder."

**More information:** The desire to expel unselfish members from the group; Parks, Craig D.; Stone, Asako B.; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 99(2), Aug 2010, 303-310.

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