

➤ If you witnessed an accident, what would you do? Would you rush over to help, administer first aid to casualties and call the emergency services? Or would you stand by and watch, waiting for someone else to get involved? However much you'd like to think you'd be the hero, research suggests that you're more likely to do the latter. But why is this?

Leave it to someone else...

This behaviour is called the bystander effect or bystander apathy. It occurs in particular when we're afraid of 'losing face' in front of strangers. In this situation, it's because we might assume that there are other people better qualified to get involved than we are or that our actions might be ineffective or, worse still, counterproductive. In other words, it's a fear of failure.

It sounds like an irrational fear, particularly when the consequences of our not getting involved could be that someone in trouble doesn't get the help they need, but it's been observed in many psychological experiments and in real-life emergency situations.

Using your loaf

Before the discovery of the bystander effect, a similar effect was observed in the workplace. What was discovered is a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'social loafing'. This is where a group of individuals working on a task together will personally contribute less effort than if they were working on their own.

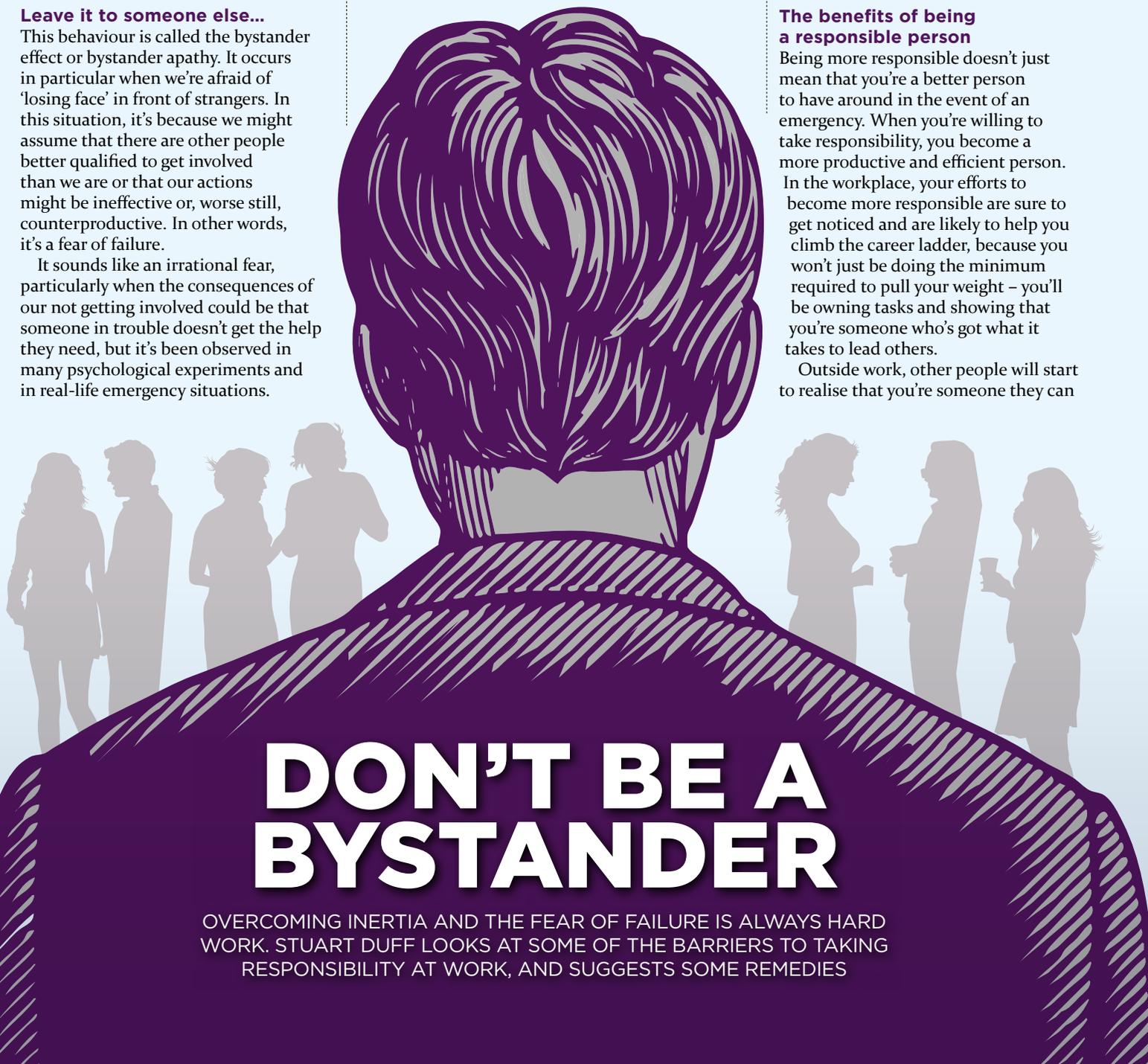
This is a subtle effect, first shown in a simple rope-pulling exercise, in which individuals exerted less energy pulling the rope as part of a group than they did as an individual.

Often, the most common reason for loafing is feeling that any effort will not be utilised or recognised, so a sense of personal responsibility can be critical to our overall effectiveness in work.

The benefits of being a responsible person

Being more responsible doesn't just mean that you're a better person to have around in the event of an emergency. When you're willing to take responsibility, you become a more productive and efficient person. In the workplace, your efforts to become more responsible are sure to get noticed and are likely to help you climb the career ladder, because you won't just be doing the minimum required to pull your weight – you'll be owning tasks and showing that you're someone who's got what it takes to lead others.

Outside work, other people will start to realise that you're someone they can



DON'T BE A BYSTANDER

OVERCOMING INERTIA AND THE FEAR OF FAILURE IS ALWAYS HARD WORK. STUART DUFF LOOKS AT SOME OF THE BARRIERS TO TAKING RESPONSIBILITY AT WORK, AND SUGGESTS SOME REMEDIES

rely on, bringing new opportunities to enrich your life. But before you can start to behave more responsibly, you need to understand what's currently holding you back and the steps you can take to overcome these blockages.

What stops us taking responsibility? We've already seen some of the reasons for not taking responsibility in the accident scenario described above, and that fear of failure can be one of the biggest considerations that holds us back. We are conditioned from an early age to seek approval from other people. This means that, unless we're sure that we'll be successful, we avoid doing things that could risk drawing criticism.

Conquering the fear of failure

So what do we need to do to overcome this barrier?

- **Identify what it is that you're afraid of.** By defining it, you're making a start on challenging it.
- **Evaluate.** Review the fears you've written down and assess whether they're rational concerns. What's the worst that could happen if your fear were to be realised? At this point you can also exercise some methods for keeping your fears in check: writing them down, focusing on the present moment and thinking about the successful moments in your life that you needlessly worried about beforehand.
- **Reinterpret your fears.** Peel back the layers of the fear to find out what's at the bottom of it, and where they originate. For example, are you only afraid because of something that happened to someone else?
- **Do something about it.** Doing nothing is often counterproductive, because the longer you do nothing, the more your fears take root and grow. Talk to other people, who may help to put your fears into perspective, and focus on the positive outcomes from each of your decisions, no matter how small. Gain confidence from thinking about what you'll learn, and from developing different ways of achieving what you want to achieve – these are your back-up plans, and they make failure less likely.

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What else might be stopping you?

Tying in with the accident scenario, we may be held back by an assumption that we don't have the relevant expertise and that someone else does, for example, a doctor or police officer. We therefore convince ourselves that our intervention is unnecessary or even unwanted.

Another common excuse for not stepping up to the mark in the workplace is a lack of time. We frequently perceive ourselves to be too busy to take responsibility for a task, although closer inspection may prove that spending too much time being unproductive may in fact be to blame. There is always too much to do if we don't focus on the most immediate tasks first. In other words, if you want to be more effective, prioritise!

Alternatively, we might actually be willing to take responsibility in a situation, but we're just not sure how to convince other people that we are.

Why should I bother? We may also avoid taking responsibility for a task because we're simply not interested in it. If that's the case, here are four simple actions that can help you deal with this mental barrier:

- 1. Understand what motivates you.** Do you know what motivates your colleagues and how this might relate to the current situation? We are all motivated by different things – the opportunity to learn frequently motivates people more than money, so looking at what you may achieve personally through your involvement may spur you into action.
- 2. Appreciate the bigger picture.** The task you or others have been avoiding might seem mundane or unrewarding, but it could have a far-reaching overall impact. Recognising how a single issue or task dovetails into a 'bigger picture' can often reignite flagging interest.
- 3. Utilise the power of the psychological contract.** The psychological contract is the implicit understanding and trust between people engaged in fulfilling objectives or tasks together, or between those

who give instructions and others who carry them out. Unlike a legal contract, it's unwritten and usually unspoken, yet understood and expected by those involved. It accounts for the kind of things we all do (or don't do) in the workplace and elsewhere, which aren't detailed in job descriptions, but to which we psychologically contract as members of a larger group or organisation. For example, checking the office building is secure when you're last to leave is something you might do, even though you're not the caretaker; it's a pain to do and you're already late...

4. Set a great example. If they don't, why should I? An organisation's ethos or culture is determined less by its policies and procedures than by the behaviour of its employees. It only takes the example of a single individual to influence many others.

Draw up an action plan

The last step in taking responsibility is to act. If this prospect still daunts you, research suggests that planning how you will achieve your goal will make it much more likely that you will do so in reality.

In creating a plan of action, consider the points covered above and decide what is most relevant to you. Now, identify how you might apply your plan to a specific situation and consider, not only about what you could do, but also what might deter you. By identifying any potential problems in advance, you have the opportunity to think of suitable solutions to deal with them or, if necessary, to develop alternative courses of action.

Finally, don't forget to enlist the support of others. Knowing you have access to advice will give you confidence and increase your personal and professional effectiveness. ♡

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