

Bringing “You’re Fired” into the BCOM Classroom.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: Why implement such a policy in the first place?

- A: Since students often refuse to take group work seriously and lack a sense of accountability, they tend to penalize those students who meet their group work responsibilities. Yet students often have no recourse but to “take it,” as they have no authority to force a change. This policy empowers students to eliminate free riders from collaborative work teams...if needed. It also informs students (in no uncertain terms) about the level of responsibility they are expected to show towards their teammates.

Q: What does this policy require in terms of materials to implement?

- A: Nothing material, though it does require (a) a review of the policy in class, (b) a periodic reminder of the policy as and when group work approaches, and (c) a clear policy statement in the course Syllabus.

Q: What might such a policy statement look like?

- A: Please find a sample below that spells out most elements of the policy:

“Any team member who is not performing effectively in the eyes of the remainder of the team can be **FIRE**D from the team. Firing can only occur with the approval of the instructor after an appropriate consultation with the “firing” team members. In addition, the instructor may proactively fire any team member for noticeably substandard work or for letting the team down on more than one occasion.

The primary causes for firing include invisibility (i.e., the student has not communicated with the team on a timely basis); missing at least one team-project related class session; or for general non-performance (i.e., the student in question does not complete his/her work in a timely manner, or he or she produces work of obviously poor quality). To institute a firing, a member of the team must draft a brief email memo to the instructor outlining the rationale for firing. The instructor will make a final firing decision based upon the rationale provided in the memo and/or upon the instructor’s observation of inappropriate participation levels or behaviors. Finally, the instructor is the only individual permitted to notify a fired student of his/her new isolated status.

A fired team member will be given a choice: either to complete the team report by him or herself, or to receive no credit for that assignment. A fired team member will not be permitted to earn a higher score than the remaining team members on the project. For

example, if the team earned a C on the written report, the highest grade the fired individual could earn would be a C.

Furthermore, a fired team member cannot produce a group oral presentation, and thus will receive a zero on that assignment.

Note, too, that when a team assignment is turned in, if multiple team members report that a specific team member has laxly participated in the project or has contributed a significantly smaller amount of work than his or her peers, then the final points for the project may be adjusted by the instructor such that the points for the underperforming team member may be reduced or eliminated.

Therefore, your goals in a team project include cooperating and working within your team so that you are not fired—nor are your project points reduced.”

Q: Why does such a policy make sense within the context of BCOM activities?

- A: Preparing a case for “firing” a team member is perhaps the most direct and consequence-bound practice a student can have for delivering a “bad news” message within an academic context.

Q: Can an instructor proactively “fire” a student from a team?

- A: According to the sample policy above—yes. However, that decision is best left up to each instructor to decide for him or herself. For instance, some instructors may choose to leave this choice solely up to the students affected by non-performance.

Q: Who communicates the new “fired” status to an affected student?

- A: In order to avoid direct confrontations between students, it is recommended that the instructor deliver the changed status message. However, the team from which the request originates first needs to provide sufficient evidence of non-performance to justify a firing.

Q: What evidence suggests that the policy reduces group dysfunction?

- A: In the author’s experience, before the policy was implemented roughly half of all groups exhibited evidence of significant “free ridership.” After the policy, student evaluations and the experience of periodic firings suggest that percentage of groups affected has dropped from 50% to roughly 12%. Moreover, most students claim that their group projects were the best that they had yet experienced... and that they openly state that they would be quite content to work with those same group members again.