The “Free Rider”: even if you do not know the term, I can guarantee that you have had to deal with such an individual at some point as part of a group project. The “Free Rider” is the person within a group who contributes nothing at all and, in the end, gets the exact same mark as the rest of the team.

Coming to Cass, I knew that I would have to deal with this type of group work “species” again. To be honest, you come across people like that multiple times, as they transcend the bounds of universities and can be found both in the workplace and everyday life. I knew that this was not going to be a challenge for me. Having to step up in order to save a group project because one member refuses to do their part? Tale as old as time.

What I did not expect to find at Cass though, was the evolution of this species, the “Free Rider 2.0”. See the “Free Rider” in my team did not only do nothing, but ended up downgrading me at peer assessment. So he did nothing- as a typical “Free Rider”- but this new version decided to also give me (and only me) a lower score at peer assessment. This was his idea of saying thank you for me working extra to do his part, I guess.

The difference in my grade was not really significant to be honest. What actually bothered me was the notion behind it, the reason why I got underscored.

Why was I the only one in the group that he had a problem with? What did I do that was so negative that I had to be “punished” for it? After all, I had done most of his work given that he had no interest in helping with the groupwork in the least. Was it so difficult for him to understand that in order to get work done, someone will have to take a leading position, set out deadlines and expect of everyone to follow them? Seeing him in his new team for the next semester, I realised that he had no problem being told what to do by his friends: he is now doing his job (I suppose) with no tricks and no lying. So, it must have been really hard for him to accept this kind of pressure coming specifically from me.

What I realised is that no matter how hard I tried to get to him, he could never accept me as the “organiser” of the group and so he decided to take it out on me. I got penalised for asking the most basic of things. I got penalised for being bossy. I got penalised for having expectations. I got penalised for demanding he did his job. I got penalised because I wanted the best for my team. I got penalised for trying to be a leader.

To be honest, this sort of group dynamic was new to me. I had never found myself in a similar position, and that had a lot to do with the fact that we were from completely different backgrounds. After an open confrontation with the “Free Rider” rather early in the semester, two of the other team members told me that although they agreed with my points they could never do what I did and confront him directly- it was not the way that they had been taught to deal with issues like that. They even suggested I should never confront him again because there is always peer assessment and he could take it out on me at it. I told them that I always deal with issues like this directly and would not let him take advantage of the team’s hard work. We concluded that it was a “culture thing” and had a laugh about it. I understood that within a multicultural team, there were many extra parameters that needed to be taken into account in order to ensure smooth sailing, but being “punished” for having high expectations for a team was something new for me.

The real challenge for me moving forward was coming to terms with the take-away of this experience: should I change, adapt, constrain myself in order to better “tick the boxes” of what a female leader means to people from different backgrounds or should I be my usual bold and driven self with all the consequences that this entails?

Probably the real challenge was having to come to terms with the reality that we still have a long way to go, don’t we? Disappointed but not surprised.

Semper ad meliora.