

Peer Pressure Is Easy - You Aren't

All experienced group riders know that each individual in the group is responsible for their own safety. They know that in every group, one of them has the least experience or skill/control. Generally, they know that the group should ride to the skills of the least common denominator - the least experienced, or least skilled/controlled.

But sometimes you join a group for a ride and many if not all of them are strangers. Sometimes a new member joins your group and you have no idea what their skill level or experience might be. This should be a serious concern to the lead bike (often called the Road Captain - though not necessarily so.)

Since it's up to the lead bike to set the pace, how can that be done without knowing what the least common denominator is? Clearly this is an argument for a pre-ride meeting and some questions designed to find out as much as you can about who you are riding with.

But realities are such that even if you try to find out who has the least experience or least skill/control, the odds are that you will have trouble doing so. People have 'face', after all. People are reluctant to be seen as the weakest of the group. Worse, and we have seen tragic results of this recently, some people honestly believe they have better skills/control than they really do and are quite convincing about it with others.

From a lead bike point of view, a solution is readily at hand - always place a new member of the group in the last right-track position (sometimes called the 'slot') in front of the drag bike and have the drag bike observe how that person actually rides. Once the drag bike advises the lead bike that the new person demonstrates adequate skill/control then that person is freed to ride anywhere they want to in the group. Until everybody in the group is at least seen to have reasonable skills/control while riding with the group, the lead bike has no business pushing any limits.

But the heading of this message regards peer pressure, and I would like to talk briefly about group dynamics that are dangerous precisely because of peer pressure. Even assuming that everyone in a group is well known to each other, there is still a least experienced, least skilled/controlled person there. That person usually feels that he/she has very little choice but to try to 'keep up', to try to not hold the rest of the group back. If nothing else, they often think that 'stretching' themselves is a learning experience.

And while it is definitely a learning experience, if you survive it, 'keeping up', or not holding the rest of the group back should NOT be part of the equation!! A brave person will acknowledge their weaknesses and not push the envelope aggressively, even if it means that the rest of the group will recognize those weaknesses. A smart person believes absolutely that THEY are responsible for their own ride/safety - and not incidentally, in not being a potential hazard to anyone else. These people ignore peer pressure to the point that they might not fit into a particular group - and that's just fine for all concerned!

But peer pressure is NOT the real danger - there is always peer pressure (sometimes thoughtless, sometimes just good natured competition, sometimes no more than shared courtesy.) It is YOUR OWN PERSONAL pressure to perform that can be dangerous. I call that your 'head'.

What I'm getting at is mental 'rightness' - being ready and prepared to do what you are about to do, and knowing it.

If your head is not 'right', STOP and get it 'right' before you go another two feet on your motorcycle!!!!

After more than 30 years of riding motorcycles there are times when I simply feel that I cannot safely do something that I have done a thousand times before - sometimes the most trivial of things. For example, a few years ago I was on a tour to Tulsa, Oklahoma and our group had just finished a pit stop and were on our way back onto the road. We were on a parking lot that had a driveway with a relatively severe dip in it as it joined the main road where we then had to make a hard right turn to get underway. All the bikes ahead of me did just fine with that dip. But when it was my turn to negotiate that driveway I decided that my head was not 'right' and stopped my bike. I radioed to the lead bike that I would catch up in a moment, nothing was wrong. One minute later my head was 'right', confidence restored, and I took off and joined the group. Trivial embarrassment is nothing compared to an accident.

There is no doubt in my mind at all (NOW) that I could have made that exit from the parking lot without a problem. But this is one experienced rider that is not ashamed to say that when my head is 'wrong', I stop and wait until it gets 'right'.

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