

# No Contest

By Alfie Kohn

[This is a slightly expanded version of the original article.]

Long before anyone was talking about team-building or Theory Z — less than a decade after World War II, in fact — a sociologist named Peter Blau compared two groups of interviewers at a public employment agency. Those in the first group competed fiercely to fill job openings. In the second group, interviewers worked cooperatively, making sure to tell each other whenever a new position opened up.

Which interviewers filled significantly more jobs? If you guessed the second group, it may be because you're already aware that cooperative effort is the key to productivity. You may also know that since Blau's report was published, a pile of other studies have proved this principle again and again. Some of that research has filtered into real-world workplaces, and some managers have seen for themselves how much sense it makes to have people working with each other rather than against each other.

Still, old myths die hard and the idea persists that competition promotes excellence. I've been studying the subject for the last five years, weighing the research from many different fields, considering the impact of competition not only in the workplace but also in the classroom and on the playing field. My conclusion is that optimal productivity not only doesn't require competition; it seems to require its absence. The best amount of competition in your company is none at all.

Notice that I'm not complaining about excessive or inappropriate competition. I'm saying competition itself — which simply means requiring one person or group to fail in order that another can succeed — is inherently counterproductive. Similarly, I'm not offering a "soft" argument against competition, basing my objection solely on its destructiveness to us as human beings. I'm saying that competition also makes no sense from the perspective of the bottom line. It holds people back from doing their best.

Look at it this way: if so many Americans regard work as a chore (as is suggested by such recent bumper stickers as WORK SUCKS BUT I NEED THE BUCKS and I OWE, I OWE, SO OFF TO WORK I GO), an environment that pits us against one another might just have something to do with it. In many workplaces, each employee is led to regard everyone else as obstacles to his or her own success. In place of companionship and collaboration, there is only suspicion and rivalry. Can it really be surprising that the same rat race that feels so unpleasant also translates into reduced productivity?

Surprising or not, here's what the research makes clear:

\* Competition creates anxiety. Even when the tangible stakes (salary and promotions) aren't high,

the prospect of winding up a loser is extremely distressing. The unique pressure produced by having to defeat others — and risk being defeated — tends to inhibit performance.

\* Competitors can't exchange ideas or share skills. Let me in your office for a few days and I can destroy your employees' ability to communicate effectively. I can replace their trust in each other with hostility. I can make sure their work is redundant, with each one tackling problems that someone else has already solved. How can I do all this? By making them compete against each other.

\* Competition distracts people from the task at hand. Although our society often confuses them, victory and excellence are actually two very different ideas. They're even experienced differently. To focus on winning, on beating out a colleague, is often to divert attention from the work itself. Optimal performance depends on finding that work satisfying and challenging in its own right — not on seeing the work as a means toward some external goal such as being Number One.

If contests and other forms of competition are still utilized by managers, it may be because of the old canard that motivation will dry up without the inducement of victory. But the desire to push oneself to succeed rarely comes from having to defeat someone else. It comes, ideally, from intrinsic interest — being in love with the challenge itself. Failing that, it can come from comparing one's performance with some absolute standard or with how one did last year. It also can be inspired by the fulfillment of cooperative work. In any case, competition is at best unnecessary and at worst a serious impediment to quality work.

David and Roger Johnson, professors of education at the University of Minnesota, have performed 26 separate studies to determine whether competition or cooperation is more conducive to learning. The results: cooperation promoted higher achievement in 21 of the studies, while two had mixed results and three found no significant differences. That should be of interest to any manager whose employees spend part of their time learning skills and absorbing information.

Better performance was not the only advantage of cooperation, the Johnsons found. Freed from the pressure of having to beat each other, students developed higher self-esteem. Their enjoyment of the subject matter increased, and they came to accept each other more readily — even those with different backgrounds and abilities. These findings, of course, have profound implications for the workplace.

The research does suggest that competition on a temporary basis can sometimes be an adequate motivator for simple, rote tasks. But when higher level problem-solving or creativity is involved, there is no surer way to undermine quality than to set up a contest.

The problem isn't just with competitive structures. It's also with competitive individuals — particularly managers. A 1983 study of 310 laboratory technicians by Dean Tjosvold of Simon Fraser University and his colleagues found that subordinates who worked for a competitive leader were largely dissatisfied with their jobs; the happy, motivated employees were those whose bosses were cooperatively inclined. That finding nicely complements Tjosvold's other research, which has shown repeatedly that cooperation in the workplace translates into much better decision-making and higher productivity. It's not only more humane to work together but more efficient as well.

Does this mean that a manager need only circulate a memo reminding people that "we're all in this together"? Hardly. A manager's job — and it may well be his or her most important job — is to structure cooperation by creating a supportive climate and carefully building teams of people that produce better work collectively than any team member could turn out individually. "Creative, independent geniuses do not drive innovation in organizations; invigorating, supportive teamwork does," says Tjosvold. And developing that teamwork is the responsibility of managers, who are "the architects of cooperation through which things get done."

The foundation of cooperation is what social scientists call “positive interdependence”: a cooperative group sinks or swims together. In practice, that means all group members work for the same goal and use the same resources. The result is a shared group identity and a sense of accountability that comes from having others depend on you - a powerful motivator indeed. (In a competitive environment, the only stake others have in your performance is a desire to see you fail.)

Cooperation should not be confused with a state of perfect harmony where everyone thinks alike. Conflict is both inevitable and desirable; disagreement produces change and challenges mistaken decisions. The question is not whether conflict will exist, but whether it will take place in the context of competition, where people are trying to score points and beat each other, or cooperation, where everyone has the same goal of reaching the best possible solution. Cooperative conflict involves what the Johnsons call “friendly excursions into disequilibrium.”

Some managers have understood the need for teamwork but persist in hanging on to competition by forcing the teams to compete against each other. The research suggests that competition among groups, like competition among individuals, is both unnecessary and undesirable. Working against a common enemy isn't necessary for success or for camaraderie. It just creates warlike hostilities and closes off the possibility of sharing ideas and talents with others in the company. Real cooperation doesn't require triumphing over another group.

Of course, not all sorts of competition can be eliminated immediately. The race for promotion results partly from the pyramid-like structure that defines most American corporations. Competition among corporations, meanwhile, is, for better or worse, central to our economic system. But other sorts of rivalry can be ended with surprisingly little effort. By allowing for cooperation to replace needless competition, an office full of unhappy, anxious, unproductive people who are required to struggle against each other can be transformed into a productive, happy place to work.

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