

## Cooperation motivates - competition undermines

**Contrary to what you may think, your company will be a lot more productive if you refuse to tolerate competition among your employees**

The stress of having to defeat others - and the risk of being defeated - interferes with performance, particularly if this rivalry is between internal departments. That is supported by an increasing body of research (cf Peter Blau, 1954; Alfie Kohn, 1987).

Does this mean a move to blandness and mediocrity? Not at all! The anxiety that drives continually improving performance or the reaching for a great goal is positive and assists performance. The highly successful 2000 Sydney Olympics - called the Collaborative Games because of the cooperation compact agreed between business, labour and government in the lead up to the event - was driven by what one of the organisers called "constructive anxiety".

It is the stress of competition between internal divisions and departments and across a supply chain that is inherently destructive. Students competing for grades generally perform worse than those who help each other (cf research of W J Mc Kechnie and Donald Bruce Haines). Children competing against each other produce much less creative art than those who work together and are not pushed to compete (cf Theresa Amabile)

**The real issue is - do you want individual victories or group excellence?**

Focus on beating a colleague or winning against another department (for MY bonus, MY incentive) often diverts attention from the real delivery that benefits the whole organisation.

**Victory and excellence are simply two very different ideas.**

The greatest achievement of an organisation, business or civic, is to get optimal performance - **consistent excellence** - from ALL its members.

And real excellence comes from individuals who find their work worthwhile and satisfying - and the environment they work in conducive to high performance.

So, how do you make cooperation a fundamental value in your company?

First, accept it is useless sending around a memo - or wax enthusiastic in a motivation talk - that "we're all in this together". You have to act on the culture by modelling the right behaviours, not talk about them. In an individualistic workplace other people's success is irrelevant to one's own. In a competitive workplace the only stake one has in others' performance is a desire to see them fail.

Second, know that cooperation is a skill that can be learnt - but one that could dramatically change your organisational culture if it is missing as a lived value.

Third, accept that cooperation must be strategically structured by creating in your organisation "positive interdependence". That is, structure your organisation so that members of a work group depend on, and are accountable to, one another. This means all members work for the same goal, use the same resources and share equally in the rewards (profit share rather than individual incentives!).

Individuals succeed only when others also succeed.

BUT - do not take this as meaning no-one argues or disagrees. Conflict over issues is inevitable and desirable. Disagreement produces change and challenges mistaken decisions. Essential for sustained excellence.

In the workplace competition is at best unnecessary and at worst a serious impediment.

So, consider how your organisation would fly if its culture was built on three pillars - no competition, no blame, no fear. Just cooperative excellence.

*(with acknowledgement to Alfie Kohn: Why Competition Kills Quality and What We Should Be Doing)*