Cooperation: A Better Model

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I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU A STORY that embodies the essence of competition. Two friends were hiking in the wilds of Montana near Glacier National Park, and they came upon a grizzly bear, about one hundred yards away, and the bear started lumbering towards them. One fellow sat down and pulled his running shoes out of his back pack, threw himself on the ground, and furiously started pulling off his hiking hoots and putting on his running shoes. Now, his friend was watching this amazed, and said, “You don’t think those running shoes are going to help you outrun that bear, do you?” The first fellow looked up at him and said, “I don’t have to outrun the bear; I only have to outrun you.”

Seriously, not a day goes by without a news story or two that mentions competition. For example, the President in his “State of the Union” address last January portrayed American workers as earning our livelihood in “peaceful competition” with people all across the earth. The Postal Service has adopted a new logo costing seven million dollars and they said, “We need to send a clear signal to the American public that we are dedicated to a new level of competitiveness.” I read in the New York Times magazine section last month about “kids who grow up too fast.” The story said, “The kid of yesterday who wandered in meadows of fantasy, whose tears were reserved for skinned knees and broken toys has given way to the kid who is strapped to the competitive fast track before he is out of diapers.”

Now, when I first began to research this talk, I went to the library and punched in “competition.” Here are some of the titles that came up: “Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive,” “Out Sell, Out Manage, Out Motivate and Out Negotiate Your Competition.” Here is my favorite: “How to Work the Competition into the Ground and Have Fun Doing It.” Here is one that is actually a little sad, “Teen-Age Competition, A Survival Guide.” Many of these hooks and articles assume that competition is good for us or that it is our natural way to be or that we really don’t have any choice but to compete. That is how completely enmeshed our society is in competition.

If you can imagine a spectrum of competition, at one end are societies that function without any competition at all, and at the total opposite end is the United States of America. Our entire economic system is predicated on competition. Our schooling trains us to beat others and regard them as obstacles to our own success. Even in our own families, there is rivalry for attention and love and approval. Leisure time is filled with games in which one person or team must defeat another. We can’t even go dancing without getting involved in a dance contest.

Well, to start we need a working definition of competition. Competition is two or more people trying to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved by all of them. Or, in other words, one person succeeds only if another does not. Now, in our culture, I believe we are taught to compete. Competitive behavior . . . is not the way we were born. We were born as completely good human beings wanting to love and to be loved and to cooperate and be close to one another. There is evidence of this all around us. For example, why do you suppose the TV character Barney is such a hit with kids? It is because Barney relates to their natural way of being, of sharing, of hugging, of loving and cooperating with each other and having fun doing it. Children instinctively know that this is good.

First, I would like to cover briefly four myths about competition.

- **Myth number one says that “Competition is part of human nature.”** This says that we are born to compete. It is the nature side of the “Nature vs. Nurture” argument. Now, I don’t expect to resolve that argument today. But, as I said, I believe competitive behavior is taught and therefore, cooperative behavior can also be taught. Here is a story that illustrates the point:

  A U.S. teacher was visiting a British elementary school. He asked the children who was the smartest among them. They didn’t know what he was talking about. They had evidently never thought about it. There were no grades, no tests, no gold stars. All stories and drawings were displayed on the walls. This teacher was amazed, and he resolved to return to his U.S. classroom and make it less competitive. He later wrote, “It took three weeks for the changes to emerge. The first was an end to the destruction of each others work. Later, a spirit of helpfulness began to be common. Finally, there was what I look for as the real measure of success,” he said, Children talking freely to every adult and stranger who walks in, leading them by the hand to see projects and explaining their activities. No longer afraid, suspicious, or turned inward. He said, “These changes developed because we stopped labeling and ranking.”

- **Myth number two says, “Competition is more productive.”** The question really is, “Do we perform better when we are trying to beat others or when we are working with them?” The evidence in the literature is overwhelmingly clear. The answer is, “We perform better when we work together.” Now, the key to understanding why competition does not promote excellence is to realize that trying to do well and trying to beat others are two different things. Paying attention to who is winning distracts one from the task at hand. For example, the child who is frantically waving his arm in class to answer a question when he is called on can forget what he was about to say. His focus was on beating his classmates. Someone who runs for president may be a bad choice for the job. A good campaigner does not necessarily make a good executive. They are different skills. Competition is also not productive because, by its nature, it makes people suspicious of and hostile towards one another.

  In contrast, in a cooperative environment, people feel accepted by others and they feel safe to take risks, to play with possibilities, and benefit from mistakes rather than trying to hide mistakes to avoid ridicule. Also, cooperation results in better performance because it is more fun.

- **Myth number three says, “Competition is more enjoyable.”** Many people defend competition in recreation or in playing sports. Is this justified? Well, the problem here is that if you are trying to win, you are not experiencing true playfulness—fun, joy, and self-satisfaction. Any activity whose goal is victory cannot be play. “Sports builds character.” But it builds exactly the kind of character that is most useful for our social system. From the perspective of those who control the wealth in this country, it is very useful to have people regard each other as rivals. Sports serve this purpose very nicely. If
she is on a team, the athlete comes to see cooperation only as a means to victory, to see hostility and even aggression as legitimate, to accept conformity and authority.

There is proof all around us that competition is not enjoyable. Do you know people who get really upset when they lose a game? Who get so wrapped up in winning that the game isn’t any fun for anyone any more? Trust me. They are not having fun. They are simply doing what they do best. They are competing to win.

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- Now the fourth and last myth is, “Competition builds character.” For this myth, we have to ask, “Why do we compete?” and Alfie Kohn in his book suggested that, “We compete to compensate for low self-esteem.” Thus, we might try to be stronger or smarter than others in order to convince ourselves at some level that we are good persons.

Anyone can be shaken by a loss. Since losing hurts, competition is always damaging to some degree. What about the “thrill of victory”? Well, despite the excitement, winning fails to satisfy us in the long run and cannot compensate for the pain of losing. Why? Because there is no competitive activity for which victory is permanent. Whether we are talking about chairman of the board or champs of the Super Bowl, to become Number One is immediately to become the target for your rivals. “King of the Mountain” is much more than just a child’s game. It is a prototype for all competition.

The discovery that “making it” is often a hollow game is a traumatic event to the successful competitor, and it is one that I personally experienced. After starting my own law firm and working like a dog to build it up for ten years, I finally realized that to some of my corporate clients I was only as good as my last victory. I was constantly on the line to produce a win in each case, and losses had to be analyzed in anguishing postmortems as if life or death was at stake instead of just money. I fortunately managed to get off that roller coaster. I discovered, just like I think Michael Jordan did, that winning doesn’t satisfy us in the long run. All winning means is that we will need to do it again and again and again. Instead of contributing to self-esteem, beating other people contributes only to the need to try and continue to beat other people. It is like an addiction. A vicious circle. The more we compete, the more we need to compete.

So what is the bottom line? The bottom line is since both winning and losing have undesirable effects, it seems clear that the problem lies with competition itself. Competing drags us down, devastates us psychologically, poisons our relationships, and interferes with our performance.

The Costs of Competition

What is it about competition that damages relationships? Well, had we set out to deliberately sabotage relationships we could have hardly done better than to arrange for people to have to compete against one another. If I regard you as a rival over whom I must triumph, you become an “it” to me. An object, something I use for my own ends. Depriving our adversaries of personalities, of faces, of their subjectivity, that is a strategy we automatically adopt in all areas in order to win, whether it is relationships, sports, or the ultimate competition, war.

It is difficult to imagine a more telling indictment of an activity than the fact that it requires such depersonalization. In contrast, cooperative settings promote more mutual liking, more sharing, and more helping behaviors. An example of this is that fifth grade boys, after a bowling game, were given some coins and invited to contribute some of them to a March of Dimes canister. Those who were told they had won gave away more than those who were told they had lost. But those who had played non-competitively gave away the most of all. The point is that competition discourages generosity.

Competition is also a kind of aggression. Studies have demonstrated that athletic competition not only fails to reduce aggression as some have suggested but actually encourages it. It was Dwight Eisenhower who said, “The true mission of American sports is to prepare young people for war.” Athletic
competition consists of and promotes war-like aggression. We see more and more evidence of this in professional sports, since fights now regularly erupt not only in hockey games, but in basketball and baseball games as well. Sadly, fan violence is now a frequent companion to sports competition.

Aggressive behavior extends from any competitive area, even the classroom. It is not hard to understand why children can be violent against each other when in the classroom the highest praise is reserved for those who have beaten their peers.

WHY COOPERATE?

Is there an alternative to competition that is better for relationships? The simple fact is that when we cooperate, we are inclined to like each other more. Even in our merciless, competitive society, each of us has had a cooperative encounter, working with others to paint a room, complete a report, put on a craft fair. Cooperation teaches us the value of relationship. Cooperation means that the success of each participant is linked to that of each other and of every other. Studies show that in a cooperative environment, children encourage each other. They are more sensitive to others' needs. They have improved communication and they trust each other more. Now, why is this? It is because I will look very different to someone for whom I am a rival than to someone with whom I am a partner.

It is one thing to feel hostile in a contest that pits one person against another. It is something else to feel the aggression that rages in group rivalries. Think of the horrible results of multiplying hatred by the number of people in the group. It leads to a “we versus they” mentality that, after all, is the heart of every war. It is not readily apparent how we can end the awful legacy of nationalism, the intergroup competitions between countries that now threaten the existence of so many humans. We need to expand cooperation so as to include as many people as possible in solving problems. There are enough problems to occupy us indefinitely, and our work on them will have the delightful consequence of binding us together if we join in solving them.

Now, in politics, Congress and the President have a lot of difficulty getting legislation passed. Why is this? It is because of competition. The fundamental basis of politics is obviously that someone wins and someone loses. It is really no mystery why someone as well intentioned as Bill Clinton beats his Republican opponent in 1992, and in 1993 scratches his head in wondering as his calls for bipartisan support go unheeded. The Republicans know very well that if they cooperate with him now it will help him beat them in 1996. Is it any wonder that so little ever gets done?

Members of Congress are so worried about winning and losing in the next election that the instance of a politician doing the right thing for the common good is all too rare.

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Now, I recognize that the foregoing things are not going to be in place overnight. So what practical things can we do right now to make that transition towards a competition-free society?

Well, here is a seven-point program that I have adopted for myself, and I want to see if any of it appeals to you.

**Point one:** I am going to secure my self-esteem other than by beating someone else. I am signing up for the class on “Unshakeable Self-Esteem,” and I am going to learn more about ethical culture and the worth of every individual.

**Point two:** If by accident I find myself in a competitive game, I am not going to keep score. If it is obvious who wins, I will not make a fuss over the winner, and I will not console the losers.

**Point three:** When I find myself in a conflict, I resolve to persistently look for the common ground, to listen to and understand the other person's viewpoint. To freely admit when I am wrong or when I have acted inappropriately. To try and create a win-win solution to the problem. And, if all else fails, to bring in a mediator to help.

**Point four:** I will never compare my children's performance to that of someone else in order to motivate them to do better. I will not make my affection or approval contingent on my child's performance. I will not misuse the word “cooperate” as do others who wins, I will not make a fuss over the winner, and I will not console the losers.

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some school teachers and police officers. To cooperate is not to be obedient and subservient. To cooperate is to work together towards a common goal we all can reach. I will teach my children about the severe damage wrought by competition. If there are school programs to deal with the abuse of drugs, why not do the same with competition? The evidence is clear enough and the stakes are certainly high enough.

Point five: Stop making up contests. No contests. What does this mean? Don’t try to make sales people outdo one another. Don’t display the best homework assignment on the bulletin board. Don’t challenge our children to see who can set the table fastest. Don’t praise students for good grades or gold stars. And when talking about people, never use the words better or best. Every time we set up contests, we contribute to unnecessary and undesirable competitiveness.

Point six: We need to challenge some basic assumptions inherent in our economic and political system. Instead of taking competition for granted or as inevitable, we should ask what broader arrangements can be instituted to present us with a structure that does not require winners and losers. Whenever I compete without thinking, I will know that I am doing so by force of habit. Since I was hurt around competition, at certain times, instead of being able to think clearly, it will be like a tape recording playing in my brain forcing me, perhaps, to behave in irrational ways. A lot of emotions will come up as I try my best to choose not to compete.

So, point number seven is: I will maintain [good supportive relationships] . . . so I can deal with these emotional upsets as they come up, as they inevitably will.

Do not kid yourself. When you stop to think about it perhaps you will conclude, as I have, that competition is the root cause of many evils in our society. Teen-age gangs, police “on the take,” homelessness, hunger, domestic violence, teen-alcoholism and suicide. You can almost run down the list.

We can try and visualize a competition-free society, and that can be fun, but the bottom line is that the future of our society as we know it may just depend on what steps we take now, you and I, towards ridding ourselves of the scourge of competition.

In a speech last spring, Hillary Clinton said, “Americans suffer from a sleeping sickness of the soul.” It is, she said, “The feeling that we lack, at some core level, meaning in our individual lives and meaning collectively, the sense that our lives are part of some greater effort, that we are connected to one another. Let us be willing to re-mold society by redefining what it means to be a human being.”