



A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT COLLABORATION AND COMPETITIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

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The world around us – plants, animals, humans and organisations – displays abilities to compete and to collaborate which are crucial for our survival and well-being. Some managers argue that competitiveness, often defined as the ability of individuals to manage a set of disparate competencies to achieve prosperity [1], is the most powerful tool available to unleash new levels of success for people and profit for companies.

Competitive people are often seen as very energetic, having drive, taking the initiative and overcoming problems. They are perceived as independent and self-sufficient, prepared to work hard and thrive on challenge. Thus, many businesses try to recruit highly competitive individuals and to encourage competition between individual employees (for example, a contest between sales representatives). In fact, different levels of competitiveness show up every day in the workplace, where people compete in every area of business – not just in sales, where competitiveness is, officially, a part of the job.

However, in some business areas, competition can be a mixed blessing. When people compete directly with their colleagues, it can be harmful for communication and collaboration, particularly when competitiveness evolves into combativeness [2]. It can generate mistrust, drive internal organisation politics, power plays and personal agendas. In some circumstances, competition may also lead to wasted (duplicated) effort and to increased costs (and prices). Similarly, the psychological effects of competition may result in harm as well as good because competition increases anxiety and makes some people feel less able to perform. In a traditional competitive environment, individuals are concerned with their individual performance because the emphasis is on doing better than everyone else. If everyone in the team strives to be the Most Important Person, someone else may feel that he or she is less important and less valued. As a result, good, hard-working people leave the organisation.

However, collaboration (working together) has never been more important to business success than it is today, because work is being performed more and more by teams (not by individual contributors, not by individual departments, not by individual companies, and not even by individual countries). The ability of individuals to collaborate has become the key to the success of an organisation. Existing research (for example, Cooke and Szumal, 1994; Mullen and Cooper, 1994) [3] has consistently recognised the quality of collaboration within a team (i.e., teamwork) as an important factor for successful innovation and high performance. As Hoegel et al. (2003)[4] pointed out, strong internal team collaboration allows team members to highlight and contribute their individual knowledge and skills to both technical issues and matters of task planning and controlling, thereby increasing the team's ability to produce high quality outcomes, on time, and within budgets. The underlying foundation of collaboration is based on consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals strive to defeat other group members.

People are both competitive and collaborative by their very nature. They derive satisfaction from activities which value their abilities and include them in the process. Hoffman (1993) [5] pointed out that the increasing levels of open conflict and competitiveness both in society and in the workplace require both collaboration and consensus. He offered a concept of a 'win-win competitiveness' which combined two essentially American notions - Harvard's "win-win," and Wall Street's "competitiveness", and argued that by using "win-win" techniques the health, morale, productivity, and hence the competitiveness of individuals and organisations can be enhanced significantly. Collaborative efforts among individuals result in a higher degree of accomplishment by all team members as opposed to individualistic, competition-oriented environments in which many individuals are left behind.

Today's employees recognise that the power of ideas is multiplied many-fold through collaboration and team work. People help each other and in doing so build a supportive network which raises the performance level of each member of the team. They share their success with their teams, thereby enhancing both the individuals' and the teams' self esteem. This creates a positive cycle of good performance essential for the success

of any organisation. As Tamkin (2005) [6] pointed out, even exceptional individuals acting alone cannot create exceptional organisations. They work in the context of organisation – its policies, process, culture, strategic direction; ultimately the permissions it gives and the opportunities it creates. Therefore, organisations have to provide tools to carefully manage the competitiveness of individuals to support collaboration and to create an atmosphere where ideas flow freely and creativity is heightened.

According to Tolentino (2000) [7], trust and shared values appear as a central mechanism for work coordination and control in a modern organisation. When work is complex and constantly changing, "direct control" based on supervision becomes too expensive and unwieldy. The "bureaucratic control" based on work standardisation, rigid systems, procedures, rules and regulations is not workable either. Both models are counter-productive. Therefore, organisations must rely more on "self-management" - the form of internalised control built on mutual trust and confidence, shared values, common understanding and acceptance of the organisation's or corporate objectives, philosophies, priorities and norms. In this sense, according to Buckingham [8], the main responsibility of a good manager is not to enforce quality, nor to ensure customer service, nor to set standards, nor to build high performance teams. Each of these is a valuable outcome and good managers may well use these outcomes to measure success, but the outcomes are the end result, not the starting point. The starting point is each employee's talents and individual characteristics. The challenge for the organisation and for the manager is to figure out the best way to balance these talents and characteristics and to transform them into an excellent corporate performance.

However, identifying high achievers and building successful teams is not rocket science. All it takes is an understanding of the key personality traits and behaviours driving an individual's skills, needs, wants and desires. The key lies in recognising and addressing both the commonality and the diversity of employees' career goals, needs, work interests and motivational factors. Therefore, organisations nowadays tend to select management staff based on the strength of their existing communication, coaching and relationship building skills and continue to develop and expand managers' capabilities in these areas in order to maximise the effectiveness of the organisation's performance.

REFERENCES

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