



"Healthy Competition" - an Oxymoron?

By David Blum

"Competition is the worst possible arrangement as far as relationship is concerned"

--educator Alfie Kohn (1986)

A few weeks back I was invited to observe a teambuilding session involving the cooking of a group meal -- call it "team cuisine". Working in small groups, each team was assigned the task of preparing pizza, salad and dessert for the day's lunch. The activity started with a food auction, with teams bidding for ingredients. It continued with an hour of food preparation, after which each of the team's "culinary creations" were judged by a panel for both taste and presentation values. The winning team received a nice prize- and bragging rights.

Sounds like fun, right?

Think again. On the surface, everyone's energy and spirits seemed to be quite high. During the activity, teams were clearly enjoying teasing and taunting each other. In the spirit of comraderie, they "circled the wagons" around their worktables, shooing away would-be spies and intruders. And in the end, the winning team received its prize to the accompaniment of enthusiastic cheers and ironic catcalls. Everyone appeared to be energized and bonded by the experience-but something just wasn't right. Although mouthing expressions of "good sportsmanship," the losing participants seemed clearly to be disappointed. An undercurrent of murmurs could be detected, with expressions like "Geez, I can't believe we lost to those jerks" and "The jury was rigged!" What had been intended as a team "building" activity was devolving into an exercise in team "dis-empowering". Only a small percentage of the participants -the winners - seemed truly satisfied with the event. The majority -- pretty much everyone else- left the event feeling let- down, disgruntled, and upset.

Did the cooking activity have to wind up this way?

(See the end of this article for my alternative solution)

We live in a competitive culture-of this there can be no doubt. We love our winners...our Superbowl champs, our victorious politicians, our spelling bee victors. And we vilify our losers...poor Michael Dukakis (beat out by George Bush Sr. in the 1988 election)... sad

sap Bill Buckner (whose "unpardonable" fielding misplay allowed the Red Sox to lose to the Mets in the 1986 World Series). At nearly every level of our capitalistic democracy, we view competition as normal and natural, provided of course that we win. But is competition really inevitable? Is it healthy? Is it effective? Is it the only way? These are the questions I asked myself as I watched the negative fall-out from the team cooking competition. They are also the questions raised in Alfie Kohn's controversial and fascinating work, *No Contest-the Case Against Competition* (1986).

In his book, Kohn looks at the mechanism of competition and investigates it from all angles, exploring just why it is that we turn most of our activities into competitions. His conclusions are worth examining.

1) Is competition more productive?

Supporters of competition argue that contests increase your focus and provide energy and motivation. Kohn proves that, to the contrary, our quality of work is poorer under competitive conditions. In study after study, children test lower in combative (rather than collaborative) classroom environments. Contestants in a student piano competition-wracked with anxiety and the desire to please judges - produce less inventive, less spontaneous music. Newspaper reporters rush articles to print without sufficient fact-checking, in a mad scramble to avoid being "scooped" by the competition. Pitting oneself against others for the sake of extrinsic rewards seems not to lead to higher productivity - rather, it results in dampened creativity, diminished accuracy and considerable anxiety.

(Q: What kind of delicious and original meals might the cooking teams have concocted had they been freed of the need to please the judges?)

2) Is competition more enjoyable?

Advocates of the competitive structure contend that "a little competition never hurt anyone" - and it's fun to boot. Kohn takes issue with this, describing the unsavory side-effects of competition: namely, feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and isolation. In an intensely competitive environment, says Kohn, contestants are led to believe that winning makes them a "good" person (and by association, losing renders them "bad" people.) The idea that "winners" are good and "losers" are bad is consistently reinforced by our culture and society. When a high school football team taunts their opponents and calls them "losers" (using thumb and fore finger to make an "L" on their foreheads), they're saying, "You lost, therefore you are losers as human beings. And many of the so-called "losers" will believe it! Contests, in essence, place one's self-esteem at stake. Your worth is now conditional on victory, a state that we all know is never permanent and hence can offer no genuine comfort. Winning doesn't ultimately satisfy - and yet how many "competitive" people imagine they'll be happy and whole if they can win just one more time? This drive to alleviate inadequacy through winning, Kohn argues, has the air of addiction; one returns to it again and again, hoping that this time it'll last - which of course it never can.

(Q: Could the "losing" cooking teams have been feeling a similar emotion — that because they'd lost, they were somehow diminished as people? What result might have felt more satisfying for all the teams?)

3) Does competition build character?

Ask any Little League coach this question and she'll answer, "Of course it does! Our kids develop self-discipline, intestinal fortitude, and team communication skills."; Kohn offers an alternative interpretation: that non-competitive team activities offer the same opportunity to set goals, display self-discipline and master skills. Trying to do well and beat others are two different things. One can develop the same elements of "character" -- stretching one's abilities to the utmost -- in a collaborative activity, without the necessity of trying to beat or dis-empower others. And again, posits Kohn, the fall-out of competition is considerable. People learn to value the *product* rather than the *process*, missing much of the enjoyment of the activity. They see the world as a dichotomous place, populated only by winners and losers. And aggression and hostility are very much cultivated - as anyone who has sat through a British soccer can match can certainly attest. Competition builds character all right, but is it the kind of character we want for our youth?

(Q: Did the cooking teams need to compete in order to build unity and camaraderie? Might not they have bonded just as well - if not better - in a collaborative setting?)

4) Does competition build relationship?

The structure of competition, at its most elemental level, is such that a person (or group) can achieve his (or their) own goal only at the expense of others not reaching their goals. Your rival, in essence, becomes a "thing" rather than a person, deprived of subjectivity. Kohn argues that competition not only discourages connection and relationship, it engenders envy, contempt and distrust. The strongest competitors, he asserts, lose their ability to empathize-a mindset that is remarkably difficult to keep limited to the playing field. But what about the camaraderie you share with your teammates? Isn't that a collaborative relationship? Kohn concedes the point, but rues the fact that such intra-group cooperation so often accompanied by inter-group competition. As a sales manager recently told me, "The fastest way to build a team is to rally them against a common enemy." Kohn sees the price as too high, wondering "why not expand cooperation so as to include as many people as possible rather than restricting it to one's in-group?"

(Q: Did the cooking teams need to achieve their internal bonding at the expense of generating dislike for the other teams? How could they have structured the activity so that teams could cooperate not just within teams but across teams?)

5) Is there a path beyond competition?

Instead of taking competition for granted, Kohn suggests we "ought to be asking what broader arrangements might be altered so as to present us with a structure that does not require winners and losers." Coaches could introduce collaborative games into their

schools as a way of "reconceptualizing recreation". Teachers could discuss methods for altering the current competitive grade structure. Politicians could emphasize "mutual security" rather than "national security." Kohn sees the process as a collective effort, requiring a good deal of education and organization. A difficult task, to be sure, but eminently possible and extremely worthwhile.

As I said, Kohn's arguments are controversial. One might be tempted to argue that what in fact defines us as Americans is our "competitive spirit". Nevertheless, I think Kohn's points are worth at least considering. Is there a way beyond contests, competitions and prizes? Would there be benefit in shifting our business structures away from "relationship-busting" competition and toward "relationship-building collaboration and cooperation?"

Dr. Clue's *Alternative* Cooking Activity-the Collaborative Way:

Assume that the menu is the same as in the teambuilding activity above: pizza, salad, dessert. Each team is given ingredients and told that their contribution will be rated on a scale of 1-10. Assuming that there are six teams, the cumulative score possible for the entire group is 60 points. Now here's the twist: participants are informed that the only prize to be given out will be a group award, dependent on the teams achieving a cumulative total of at least 55 points. In short, there are no individual prize, no individual winners. Teams will need both to strive towards meeting an individual performance standard while simultaneously making sure that the other groups are reaching a satisfactory achievement level of their own. Only when all teams perform well — helping each other, swapping recipes, sharing advice — does everyone win. Imagine the difference!

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