

# Overcoming Inappropriate Competition in the Workplace

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## Overcoming Inappropriate Competition in the Workplace

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**C**ompetition is the guiding principle of our country's economy. When used appropriately, competition raises the bar for the quality of goods and services, as well as the skill levels of employees. However, inappropriate uses of competition can result in turf wars, resentment or retaliation, loss of appropriate "spillover" to related, important programs that reward only one or a few persons, individuals withholding important information from other individuals, groups being held between a coalition, malicious gossip and goss, decreased interpersonal relationships, less morale and productivity, and unresolved conflicts, or worse, conflicts that need never have existed. Many leaders, managers and executives, who are otherwise ethical, reasonable, powerful people, fall into the competitive "Win/LOSE" paradigm without questioning its true effects.

### The Game

In my leadership, mentoring and conflict resolution training for organizations, I introduce a game early in the session in which I separate people into two similar sized groups. I state that the goal is "to get as many points as possible." After describing the rules, I read the general rules to strategize. When the groups return, at 85% of the cases, the game will be played competitively between the two groups. While trying to score points, they use valuable resources to block the other group from scoring. The usual outcome is one group claiming victory and bragging how they are "number one." Continuing to proceed, I ask the question, "What was the goal?" The usual individual answer is, "For our team to win the game." Other answers include, "to prevent the other team from scoring," and "to maximize our dominance." Next, I restate the goal... "It's simply to get as many points as possible." Then I reveal that there are 100 points possible. One by one, on this same date of their resources were squandered keeping the other group down, each participant gets the "1000" Colored, they realize how they inadvertently discovered a competitive paradigm to play the game against the other group.

In our thought processes that the division of the group is enough to show what is being said.

### Implications in the Workplace

It's not surprising that I'm coming across the question, "Who has time to lose?" as one raises a hand. If no one has to lose, why do we insist upon the competitive workplace scenario in the competitive workplace? Of course we like to win, but would we like harmony and cooperation more than competition? I believe most business people have simply never considered that there can be an alternative paradigm.

Of course an alternative approach is going to totally rid us of conflict in the workplace. Conflict is inevitable most times of our lives because of differences... personal preferences, different backgrounds, different experiences, etc. But is there a better way to deal with conflict than "someone has to lose and a win game for me?" I believe there is.

In the popular book entitled, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey describes three principles for organizational success that apply especially to conflict: (1) First, Win/Win Mutual Benefit is at human interaction; (2) Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood (empathy, listening and (3) Emigrate (emigrate) conflict one for a Win/Win result. When parties involved in conflict use for a Win/Win outcome, later in the other parties involved and cooperate with them, and then cooperate, collaborate and figure out solutions that meet everyone's needs, relationships are built and solidified, not destroyed. And as trusting, cooperative relation ship grows, conflict becomes less threatening.

But let's not be naive about the fact that competition is very real when systems and procedures within an organization are being considered. Management compares individual performance to determine who will be promoted. So, what's a partner or a company to do?

The answer lies in understanding and eventually embracing the concept of "cooperation" - appropriate cooperation and sharing of information and resources between competing individuals in a company and even between organizations like Meeting Process International. Ideally, cooperation can be key to the growth and the raising of standards in industries and their associations, although many associations have practiced cooperation for a long time, the term itself is relatively new and needs wider recognition.

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# OVERCOMING INAPPROPRIATE COMPETITION IN THE WORKPLACE

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Competition is the guiding principle of our country's economy. When used appropriately, competition raises the bar for the quality of goods and services, as well as the skill levels of employees. However, inappropriate uses of competition can result in turf wars, management by intimidation, heads of departments "fighting" for budgets, incentive programs that reward only one or a few persons, individuals withholding important information from other individuals, grudges being held between coworkers, malicious gossip and jokes, destroyed interpersonal relationships, low morale and productivity, and unresolved conflicts, or worse, conflicts that need never have existed. Many leaders, managers and employees, who are otherwise affable, reasonable, peaceful people, buy into the competitive WIN/LOSE paradigm without questioning its true affects.

## The Game

In my leadership, teambuilding, and conflict resolution training for organizations, I introduce a game early in the session in which I separate people into two similar-sized groups. I state that the goal is "to get as many points as possible." After describing the rules, I send the groups away to strategize. When the groups return, in 99% of the cases, the game will be played competitively between the two groups. While trying to score points, they use valuable resources to block the other group from scoring. The usual outcome is one group claiming victory and bragging how they are "number one." Continuing to process, I ask the question, "What was the goal?" The most prevalent answer is, "for our team to win the game." Other answers include, "to prevent the other team from scoring," and "to maximize our dominance." Next, I reiterate the goal... "It is simply to get as many points as possible." Then I reveal that there are 100 points possible. One by one, as they realize some of their resources were squandered keeping the other

group down, each participant gets the “AHA!” Collectively, they realize how they automatically assumed a competitive paradigm to play the game against the other group.

I get blamed for setting them up to misinterpret the game by dividing them into two “teams.” I point out that I called them groups, not teams. But because of the division, they automatically hear “teams.” The competitive paradigm is so ingrained in our thought processes that the division of the group is enough to skew what is being said.

### **Implications in the Workplace**

If I ask participants in my training sessions the question, “Who here likes to lose?” no one raises a hand. If no one likes to lose, why do we insist upon the inevitable win/lose scenario in the competitive workplace? Of course we like to win, but would we like harmony and cooperation more than competition? I believe most business people have simply never considered that there can be an alternative paradigm.

Of course no alternative approach is going to totally rid us of conflict in the workplace. Conflict is inevitable most days of our lives because of differences...personal preferences, different backgrounds, different experiences, etc. But is there a better way to deal with conflict than “someone has to lose and it ain’t gonna be me?” I believe there is.

In his popular book entitled, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey describes three principles for interpersonal success that apply especially to conflict: (1) Think Win/Win (mutual benefit in all human interactions); (2) Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood (empathic listening); and (3) Synergize (cooperative creativity, using everyone’s best gifts). When parties involved in conflict aim for a Win/Win outcome, listen to the other parties involved and empathize with them, and then cooperate, collaborate and figure out solutions that meet everyone’s needs, relationships are built and solidified, not destroyed. And as trusting, cooperative relationships grow, conflict becomes less threatening. But let’s not be naïve about the fact that competition is very real when careers and promotions within an organization are being considered. Management compares individual performances to determine who will be promoted. So, what’s a person or a company to do?

The answer lies in understanding and systemically embracing the concept of “coopetition”...appropriate cooperation and sharing of information and resources between competing individuals in a company and even between organizations (like Meeting Planners International). Actually, coopetition can be key to the growth and the raising of standards in industries and their associations. Although many associations have practiced coopetition for a long time, the term itself is relatively new and needs wider recognition and acceptance as a workplace concept.

Coopetition is based on the principle of the individual having the betterment of the team and the organization at heart rather than self-promotion. How well a person fosters teamwork, serves internal and external customers, problem solves, and helps to meet the organization’s goals become the measuring stick for career promotions.

By embracing and promoting coopetition, along with cooperation, collaboration, synergistic problem solving, and creativity, an organization can overcome inappropriate competition in the workplace. The creative energy unleashed in the resulting cooperative teamwork can have a dramatic positive effect on the bottom line, and that will make everyone in the organization happy!

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