

Comparisons May Be Hazardous to Your Health!

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Competition! Ah, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat! It sounds good when marketing a sports show on television, but is it healthy for your organization? Is it healthy for you personally?

Competition is everywhere in our society. For example, consider "March Madness." For those who don't follow sports, the annual college basketball season ends with a tournament among the top 64 teams in the nation. Teams have played the initial round; winners play successively to reduce the number of competitors to 16, then 8, and then the "Final Four."

Are the players on a team that fails to make the final four poor team members? Of course not. They are among the best in the nation. Their team merely lost one particular game. One game does not convert a good team into a bad team. On April 18, the loser of the championship game will still be an outstanding basketball team. Need the members of that team hang their heads in shame?

In a similar way, one bad day--or even one bad interaction--doesn't make you a poor performer or a worthless contributor. Yet I've dealt with a couple of clients lately who are beating themselves up over a particular situation they mishandled.

We create problems for ourselves when we start comparing, defining success in terms of competition with others. Unfortunately, when we use comparison with others as our criteria, we tend to create problems for ourselves. The unintended effects of deeming ourselves better or worse than "those people" are negative.

If we determine we are better, then we could potentially become prideful, cocky, or arrogant. Worse yet, we might become slothful, complacent, or apathetic.

If we determine we are worse than the competition, we can become depressed, defensive, or just downright discouraged.

Sure, looking for successful performance in potential role models can be useful as a benchmark for our own growth. Once we have established some criteria upon which to base our evaluation, then the competition should be with our former performance. My article from last week then becomes an extremely relevant tool.

As a quick review, last week's article encouraged asking two questions. "What did we do well?" forms a foundation upon which to build future success. We should certainly retain what has worked for us, and we should build on it.

"What could we do better in the future?" leads us to consider creative new approaches that could result in greater achievement. Those ideas could come from outside sources, of course. But there's very little value in beating ourselves up because "we're not as good as" some other entity.

Doing so could easily lead to the feelings of anxiety described in my recent articles on the impostor syndrome. Despite good performance, an individual can easily feel inadequate. The feeling likely does not represent the truth of the situation, but the impact on the individual is decidedly real.

(Note: If you are interested in these recent articles, you may find them on my website (see below). Click on the page entitled "Dennis' blog.")

As a leader in your organization, be careful about attempting to motivate your team members by pointing out how well your competition is doing. Admittedly, there is a fine line of balance required here. You can't bury your head in the sand and not address current reality. However, your vision of what could become true for you should be based on your definition of what's possible, not a comparison to some other person or organization.

As you seek to build a healthy culture, emphasize improvement against your former best performance. Work to build on whatever is excellent and praiseworthy. Define "success" on your own terms, not in relation to what others are doing.

Celebrate your progress. There are just too many unexpected negative outcomes of comparative judgments.

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