Competition: Friend or Foe?

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Is competition between individuals or teams at work good or bad? The answer is "yes." When taken to extremes, it is easy to see that cut-throat competition where one group works to succeed at the expense of another group will lead to poor performance or even sabotage. If you doubt that, just start watching The Apprentice on TV. I have not watched it in a few years, but it used to be based on taking 1000 bright business students and creating 999 losers and one winner.

On the other extreme, we know that pit crews are amazingly competitive in a good way. They will work for days to shave a few tenths of a second on a pit stop. They are seeking perfection, and the friendly competition between teams creates an atmosphere that breeds excellence.

How can you know if you are creating the kind of competition that is healthy? Here are some signs that you have crossed the line from useful competition to the detrimental variety.

1. Teams plan activities that advantage their group but disadvantage another group.
2. People manipulate numbers in order to win out over the competition.
3. People try to raid personnel from a different team.
4. Gossip or rumors about another team take on a hurtful tone.
5. The formation of cliques becomes an egregious activity.
6. Team celebrations become disruptive or dangerous.
7. Teams fail to share resources that were intended to be used by multiple teams.
8. Teams demonstrate a lack of trust.
9. Team members refuse to be cross trained.
10. Teams hold information back or become secretive on some issues.

Monitor your teams at work, and look for the signs of unhealthy competition. In general, some friendly competition is a good thing, but when it is carried to an extreme, really

bad things can begin to happen. If the competition is fostering some of the symptoms above, here are seven remedies that can help.

1. Clarify the goals. Remind people in different groups that they are all part of a larger effort.
2. Reinforce people who demonstrate healthy competition, and counsel people who are on the other extreme.
3. Cross-pollinate members of the teams so it becomes harder to draw on historical loyalties.
4. Hold team building activities for the larger team and intermingle the groups to build chemistry.
5. Be sure stated goals do not encourage silo thinking by ensuring alignment with the larger organization.
6. Celebrate success of teams in the larger environment to create a winning culture.
7. Remove team members who exhibit poor attitudes toward other teams.

Many organizations use contests or other overt methods of encouraging team competition. These can be helpful or hurtful depending on how they are administered. Make sure the competition in your organization is enhancing overall performance rather than fostering bad blood between groups. Use the tips above to keep competition healthy.

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