

## COMMUNITY

# How important is competition?



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"Thus we assume it is only natural to want to come out on top. To distinguish ourselves as better than, other than, separate from. We learn to live over/against one another, out of touch with the sacred value of that which is, in fact, most fully human — common — among us."

(Carter Heyward)

In this quote, Carter Heyward describes the nature of competition in our society. She depicts an ingrained societal phenomenon that separates rather than unites individuals. In order to have one winner, someone must fail and no one enjoys failing. Our American culture thrives on being competitive, which we learn at an early age.

When I was in the doctoral

program, I wrote my dissertation on women and competition. Although differently than men, women do compete. Since women have a propensity to be more relational, competition is often experienced as an emotionally tumultuous covert process. Through *New Woman Magazine*, I gathered my research data. Hundreds of women all over the country responded. They not only completed the questionnaire, but many took the time and wrote lengthy stories describing the demise of an important relationship when competition occurred.

Back in 1986, Alfie Kohn wrote a book titled "No Contest: The Case Against Competition" in which he recognizes the insidious destructive nature of competition and its pervasiveness in our culture. He identified four myths that continue to be applicable today. They are:

Myth 1: Competition is inevitable.

Myth 2: Competition keeps productivity high and is necessary for excellence.

Myth 3: Recreation requires competition.

Myth 4: Competition builds character.

Without getting into details, Kohn dispels these myths, backed by research. He shows that competition is not central to every culture; that people can succeed by striving to do their best; we can enjoy activities that lack winners/losers; and that competition does not build character.

Jules Henry wrote, "a competitive culture endures by tearing people down." Kohn points to how destructive our culture's obsession with competition is, especially to our relationships at work, with friends and family. When focused on being better than someone else, or striving

against them, the attention is on the advancement of self at the expense of another.

What has this competitive focus engendered in our children? The May 20, 2013, *Time Magazine* article by Joel Stein defines children born between 1980 and 2000 as the Me, Me, Me generation. As a consequence of this generation's narcissism, the article points out that these young people lack empathy.

This article suggests that the self-centered, narcissistic character is the underlying reason that this generation lacks the ability to sustain employment. In fact, the article describes this younger generation as competing differently, by going straight to the top and ignoring the systemic structure. Other articles have described this generation as having a higher incidence of cheating to succeed. Since the parental focus for this genera-

tion was on their child being "special", "No. 1", it is fair to speculate that little emphasis was on cooperating with others or supporting another. Parents need to return to teaching children cooperation.

Competition is disconnecting in relationships versus cooperation which fosters connections. Whatever happened to cooperation? The ability to work as a team? The lessons learned from cooperating with others are many.

According to Paul Wachtel, "People in a system with competitive values tend to become competitive, and in so doing they keep the system competitively oriented." Twelve years ago, my current private practice formed. Before that I had worked in many competitive systems where I liked the people, but I often felt anxious about saying the wrong thing or making a mistake. When the four of us decided

to design our own practice, we emphasized equal participation. Initially we struggled as we shifted our thoughts from the familiar competitive model to a cooperative one. It took more time to listen and integrate the different strengths of people's positions. Yet, over the long term and consistent intentionality to our mission, we have been able to sustain a cooperative environment. This does not mean each person always gets their own way, it does mean however, that each person has the opportunity to participate in decisions that create the way.

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