

## **Competition: How Women Can Hold Their Own in the Workplace**

How often have we heard from women including ourselves: “I’m not competitive. If anything, I compete against myself.” “I hate the competitiveness at work; it’d be a great job otherwise.” “I despise the one-upsmanship. I don’t want to play that game.”

How has competition gotten such a bad rap, particularly among women? And since competition is commonly encountered in the workplace, how can women approach competitiveness in ourselves and others so that we “hold our own” rather than run or get run over by it?

It seems ironic that “compete” comes from the Latin *competere* meaning “to seek together.” Today we define it as striving for an objective (position, profit, prize) with no mention of togetherness or as rivalry in which there is relationship but one of conflict or opposition. I believe that these current definitions reflect our socialization, specifically Western culture. Let’s look at some ways social conditioning has shaped our current experience of competition.

### Social Conditioning and Competition

Competition may play a different psychological role in the development of women and men. Two noted experts on women’s psychology, Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1987), propose that women search for self through connection with others while men develop by distinguishing themselves from others. So for boys and men, competition helps them to become their own person and consequently is something to be sought. Yet for girls and women, competition can be terrifying. It seems to threaten important relationships by saying, in essence, “I am not the same as you.” And since women’s identity is defined in relation to others, women may prefer to withdraw from competition than potentially lose an important person or lose their sense of self.

Leora Tanenbaum, in her fascinating book Catfight (2002), points out that women have always competed, primarily with each other. Despite the assumption that women are “relaters,” she asserts that women are conditioned to view each other as adversaries rather than as allies. Historically, there have been few legitimate arenas in which women could compete and prove their femininity – in other words, have feminine power. Being attractive, marrying a “good catch” and having “faultless children” have been the main venues. And to complicate matters, competitiveness has traditionally been viewed as unwomanly. So what has happened? Competition between women has traditionally taken a more covert route, resulting in destructive rather than constructive dynamics for women as a group.

Tanenbaum’s research emphasizes that competition is socially conditioned. Competition relates to power and, for women, has taken place in highly personal realms rather than through the expression of abilities in arenas like the workplace or sports.

These personal forms of competition do not build self-esteem because they have to do with attracting power – specifically through union with a powerful man – rather than claiming one’s own power. By contrast, Mariah Burton Nelson who is an author and former pro athlete, points out that participating in competitive sports helps one not only learn what it takes to succeed, but also how it feels to be victorious. Healthy sports competition can teach that “winning is fun and losing is no disgrace,” and how to be subordinate to no one.

Nelson comments in her book Embracing Victory (1998) that women struggle with competition because men have defined it. As women entered the workforce, they had to learn to play “men’s rules” which governed most business operations. Understandably women have felt ill-prepared and uncomfortable, because they didn’t know the rules and the language.

Nelson also notes that there are different competitive styles. The Conqueror style, which is more familiar to men, is based on domination over enemies, where winning is everything. This style can readily be observed in the military as well as certain sports and business arenas. Nelson contends that women shy away from this model because we know or can imagine what it is like to be conquered. Furthermore, women usually have been the losers in the game of sexism. We know how painful that is and prefer to avoid a win-lose dynamic. Not to mention that competition is a very different game when one is the less powerful one in the situation.

### Toxic vs Healthy Competition

In order to move forward, we need to remember that competition in and of itself is neutral. Competition per se is neither good nor bad, productive or destructive. There is gender conditioning as well as different competitive styles that influence the experience and impact of competition.

I see several elements that make competition “toxic” for many women. These elements include:

- a one-upsmanship attitude, as embodied by Nelson’s Conqueror competitive style;
- narrow ideals for what is acceptable behavior, clearly seen in Western culture’s beauty ideal, as well as workplaces in which only certain narrowly-defined (read:familiar, male behaviors) are considered to reflect “competitive edge;”
- situations in which winning or succeeding is solely defined by the outcome, and the process of “how the game is played” is ignored; and
- a competitive mindset that disregards or disrespects the integrity of others involved.

So, if competition is not by nature toxic, what can competitive situations actually contribute to our development and well-being if women are to be encouraged to embrace them? First, competitive situations compel us to strive – to work for excellence, to push our capacities. Second, competitive situations bring home the reality that the universe is not a bottomless well. Life is full of situations where the goods are limited. There will be times that we win the prize and times that others will, and that is just part of the natural order of life. Third, striving to be better is a process for building self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-esteem. Engaging in competition rather than retreating is empowering. One also learns how to handle defeat and disappointment. These are positive aspects of competitive situations that, as a group, men have benefited from much longer than have women.

In addition, let me propose what might be elements of healthy competition.

- Healthy competition embodies an attitude of “striving together” toward achievement rather than one-up\one-down domination. True, only one person or team will leave with the prize. Yet it is equally true that each participant provides a reference point to the others, encouraging efforts to match their performance or to excel it.
- Healthy competition embraces an attitude of generosity rather than exclusion. By expanding our definition of what is acceptable, we can move from “I can’t compete by those rules” or “I have to play dirty because I don’t fit the rules” to “We all learn and benefit from diversity” and “Different strokes for different folks.”
- Healthy competition focuses on abundance rather than scarcity. True, the objective may be scarce (e.g., only one position or one prize). However, the process provides abundant opportunities to learn about one’s self, develop skills and test one’s capacities. One can focus on “How does this situation enrich my life?” or “How is competing against this person allowing me to challenge myself?” rather than “What if I lose?”
- Healthy competition involves a mindset that “it’s not personal.” In a study of women in competitive careers, conducted by the National Association of Insurance Women (NAIW, 1998), a main conclusion was that women believed that men’s ability to keep matters on a business rather than a personal level was key to their effectiveness as competitors. So, helping women with the mindset that “it’s not personal” may enable them to more comfortably claim their competitive strivings. And
- Healthy competition is made possible in an atmosphere of respect for others and positive regard for one’s self. We may not have control over others’ attitudes, but we can choose how we “show up” in competitive situations.

## Where We Go from Here

So, how can we women become more comfortable, confident and effective in competitive situations? For one, we need to recognize the positive aspects of competition and identify what makes competition toxic or healthy. Second, we need to see reality clearly. There are spoken and unspoken “rules of competition” that operate in workplace settings that are powerful, that we may not embrace and that we likely have limited power as individuals to dramatically change. In addition, we need ways to inoculate ourselves when we have to work with others who embody a toxic approach to competition.

With those points in mind, here are several ways that women can move forward to embrace competition.

- 1. Examine the past.** Take a piece of paper and label it “What I learned about competition.” Draw three columns. Label the first one “Situations\Memories,” the second one “The Message,” and the third “New Choices.” Under “Situations\Memories,” write down any situations that come to mind that are related to your feelings about competition. Then, in column 2 “The Message,” write down what you learned or came to believe about competition and yourself from each situation. Review the messages in column 2, and decide what is factual about each message and what is opinion, which messages you want to live by and which messages you want to rewrite, based on your current knowledge and abilities. Finally, in Column 3 “New Choices,” write down what you choose to believe or do differently, now that you can question your internalized messages about competition. Note that you may find positive, supportive associations to competition as well as negative, inhibiting ones.
- 2. Choose a new mindset.** Shifting our mindset or perspective is critical for lasting results. For example, “Competition challenges me to be my best. Invite it.” would be an adaptive, realistic mindset. It helps to repeat your mindset frequently throughout each day until you are comfortable with it.
- 3. Manage your gut arousal.** If you have viewed competition for years as something threatening, don’t expect to feel cool and calm right away. Your body’s fight-or-flight biological system likely has gotten wired to avoid, react strongly or both in competitive situations. Techniques such as breathing exercises, relaxation exercises and mini-meditations can help you to reduce your reactivity when entering into competitive situations. Another strategy is to relabel your body’s arousal as excitement and energy, and use that energy to propel you assertively into the situation.
- 4. Use coping strategies in competitive moments.**
  - Recall that the women in the insurance industry study thought that men had a competitive advantage in not taking rejection or losing personally. The coping attitude: “This isn’t personal, I just need to do my best” can be practiced and used whenever you are entering a competitive situation.

- Imagine walking through an upcoming situation in your mind. Visualize yourself responding factually and calmly.
  - Use a technique called “anchoring,” which simply means linking a proactive thought to an inevitable behavior. For example, you could anchor a positive, open attitude, such as “What can I learn in this situation?” or “In what ways can I best contribute here?” to the behavioral cue of sitting down at the negotiations table.
5. **Develop protective buffers.** Recognizing the importance of building one’s inner resources to bolster effectiveness, women also need to be prepared to deal with men and women who operate from the metaphoric “shark,” “snake,” or “junkyard dog” competitive stances. Here are some ways to do that.
- Imagine that you are “taking your sail out of their wind;”
  - Visualize your daunting competitor as a certain animal that allows you to accurately remember who you are dealing with or to neutralize their impact;
  - Imagine being enveloped in a suit of Teflon, and that the competitive person’s words, looks and behavior just bounce off of you;
  - Think about someone (real or imagined) who brings out the best in you. Keep a visual image of that person in your mind, or have an imaginary conversation with that person before you enter a competitive situation to reduce the sense of aloneness and vulnerability when you are facing a difficult competitor.

As women gain in professional and political power, they can begin to reshape the terms of competition in the workplace. Acknowledging that such “sea changes” occur slowly and over time, it is possible for women to re-align their personal relationship with competition and enhance their ability to respond in competitive settings.

#### References

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