

## Playing to Compete, or Competing to Win?

We are witnessing the Olympics these days - men and women competing to realize their ultimate dream: winning a gold medal. We watch, we cheer, and we cry— at least the sports fans among us – when they step up the podium to hear the national anthem being played in honor of their achievement. Our soccer women who won gold last night after beating Sweden are the most recent successful examples. As coach Silvia Neid stated in an interview after the game, this win was something special after ‘only’ winning the bronze medal at the last three Olympics. “[T]his is what you have earned through your hard work over weeks and months. It’s really crazy when you get to the end. When you have finally reached your goal it is pure joy” (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/19/germany-sweden-olympics-football-final-rio-2016>).

So, obviously, sports, especially on this professional level, is about competing to win. Every child understands this and there is no gender police arguing about it (except for the group of critics including athletes like Fabian Hambuechen who, to my mind rightfully, question the scary trend to blindly seek records while continuously risking your health and life. Still, all athletes – men and women - are driven by the ambition and will to compete, otherwise they would not be there. This is different when we move outside the sphere of sports for a minute. A highly appreciated acquaintance of mine who holds a C-level leadership position at a major international firm sent me an article on a new study last week under the heading “Women Increase the Willingness to Compromise.” The study revealed that even one woman in an otherwise all-male team makes men behave more compromise-oriented. In addition, these compromises match their natural personal preference more but in the company of other men on a team, they change their preferences – supposedly due to the behavior they think is expected of them by the others. The same effect has not been observed for all-women teams. Read the summary here: <http://t3n.de/news/kompromissbereitschaft-kompromissstudie-732170/>.

Of course, this study reveals some important insights for researchers and practitioners, especially for people in HR and marketing. But I quickly thought, overall, this is simply another study telling us under a different heading what we know already. What we know a lot about already is the issue of (business) women and competition. Above all, being in favor of a compromise is just a slightly different way of saying I am not putting competition (i.e. MY personal goals/solution/will) first. Well, people who are familiar with psychological research, particularly on motivation and leadership research, might interject that all the terms I am mixing up here do mean different things. Yes, but I am not trying to be scientifically precise

here. I care about the bigger picture. So, what I want to raise here is the following critical question: Is this not another testimony that women are not competitive (enough/as compared to men)?

Do not get me wrong: I do see and I fully believe in the fact that a compromise in almost 100% of all cases is the “better” solution. Better here does not necessarily relate to the quality of the content of decision in and of itself but to the process. Any decision in an organization which follows a collective work process of some kind involving shared ownership is more likely to be accepted and what is accepted usually gets implemented. Thus, a no-compromise decision is likely to fail due to the lack of implementation and people’s support, not because of its isolated logic or degree of innovation. One should only take a look at the classic “In Search of Excellence” in which the authors Peters and Waterman identify “A Bias for Action” as one of the crucial success factors for organizations. As they state: “Since business is a ‘get-things-done’ institution, creativity without action-oriented follow-through is a barren form of behavior” (1982: 207). Also, as a coach, I am a fierce believer in the fact that competition is just a tiny factor in the overall understanding of human psychology which leaders – if they are really worth the label – have to understand. Despite all these limitations: Am I really or to I want to be seen/defined as less competitive and more consensus-oriented because I am a woman?

As stated at the outset, this is not a new question and there are many studies on this issue already. Finding: Yes, there is evidence that under *some* conditions with a *certain* predisposition, women tend to ACT (not necessarily BE) less competitive and more pro consensus, communicative, team-oriented – bla, bla... -> all the common stereotypes that we know and that partly also hold true, according to research. I am not even concerned what is “true” in this respect. What I am thinking about is the definition and effect of competition as a concept itself. Here is my opinion: I do not think that thinking, acting and maybe even being competitive is entirely bad, especially for women. Here is how the Merriam Webster defines the terms (I love checking the dictionary concerning all kinds of things I come across): to compete= “to strive consciously or unconsciously for an objective (as position, profit, or a prize) : be in a state of rivalry” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compete>). And for competition as a noun: “the act or process of trying to get or win something (such as a prize or a higher level of success) that someone else is also trying to get or win: the act or process of competing : actions that are done by people, companies, etc., that are competing against each other” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/competition>).

The latter aspect of the definitions obviously is very powerful when it comes to the public perception of anything related to competition. The verb, in English and German and probably many other languages, is followed by the preposition “against.” This naturally

evokes some mysterious “Other” one wants to ‘conquer.’ This might be one part. But what about the “Me/I” in the binary equation? Is it not possible to say that competing against others at the same time also means competing *for* me and sometimes also against myself in the positive sense of getting better than before? Research shows that human beings do have a competitive nature – including women – if we like it or not. In experiments, athletes, for example, perform better if they compete against others, not ‘just’ against themselves or the clock (this is not true for all kinds of tasks, though). They are driven to show high performance then competing against others. But the effect of competition as a motivation is similar to the Olympics: You boost your performance level. Yes, being faster than others is the primary motivation, but the result is a better performance level than in other cases. And the other party who ends up as the one not winning the competition should not be defined as the loser either. This is what we implicitly assume when we (in this case the people, sometimes feminists) argue that competitive/male behavior is bad in the first place. We suggest that being competitive means being AGAINST others as a general anti-social mindset. I doubt that.

In a nutshell: I want us to think more positively about the concept of competition and to consider it a valuable motivator to boost performance – by men and women. Above all, it is performance ~ results that count in most professional fields where women want to excel. New organizational research shows us that a competitive environment in the workplace harms rather than fosters innovation. Yet, I am not talking about competition as a threatening atmosphere. I mean competition as this inner sense of biting your tongue and walking the extra mile that it sometimes takes to get job xy or showing explicitly competitive behavior in a male-dominated environment. This is NOT a claim to the good old women need to become men in order to be successful. Not at all. I am simply saying that women can and should be competitive according to their own preference without willfully agreeing to the compromise nurse to fix team atmospheres. So, ladies, turn on the Olympics tonight and maybe you get inspired.