COMPETITION VS. COOPERATION

By Perry W. Buffington, Ph.D.

Which works better, competition or cooperation? The answer, without equivocation, is cooperation. Although most people are surprised by this, scientists have repeatedly verified it in hundreds of studies since the late 1800s. Yet big business, the educational system, the health-care community, and most parents continue to encourage competition, almost totally neglecting the power of cooperation. None of these groups realizes that unabated competition may be costing billions of dollars in sales and overall decreases in human achievement. Furthermore, researchers have shown that too much competition may cause poor health. Yet we continue to hold the cherished belief that competition (not cooperation), to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, "is the royal road to success."

If in fact competition brings out the "beast" in us, then research demonstrates that cooperation surely brings out the "best" in us. This finding has been held in virtually every occupation, skill, or behavior tested. For instance, scientists who consider themselves cooperative tend to have more published articles than their competitive colleagues. Cooperative businesspeople have higher salaries. From elementary grades to college, cooperative students have higher grade point averages. Personnel directors who work together have fewer job vacancies to fill. And, not surprisingly, cooperation increases creativity. Unfortunately, most people are not taught cooperative skills.

Dr. David W. Johnson and Dr. Roger T. Johnson, professors at the University of Minnesota and co-directors of the Cooperative Learning Center, concur and add that education and psychology have been at odds on the issue for years. Roger Johnson explains, "If we are to teach people to be cooperative, then education and psychology must work together. You see, a typical classroom teacher is taught to keep students quiet and apart, indirectly fostering competition. Yet ... people learn best when they work cooperatively with each other. Children who experience this type of learning at an early age carry it with them as they mature."

David Johnson adds, "More students feel good about themselves as learners when they cooperate. Their self-esteem goes up, they have a better sense of community, belonging, and acceptance. One can also extrapolate this finding to any setting."

The Cooperative Learning Center, cooperatively chaired by the Johnsons, has been researching and training cooperative skills for over 15 years. According to Roger Johnson, the Center has "a research base of over 500 studies dating back to the turn of the century."

Given their research and training tradition, the Johnsons are concerned that too much unsupported emphasis is placed on competition. Moreover, they feel that the means by which individuals once learned cooperative skills are eroding.

Roger explains, "There are a lot of reasons to worry. Some of the standard ways that people
once learned to cooperate - home, churches, communities - are not operating as they did a generation ago. Teaching young people how to cooperate does not receive the appropriate level of interest." As a result, competition breeds unabated. Few are teaching, practicing, or promoting a better idea.

To counteract this problem, the Johnsons work through education. Says David Johnson, "Although we do some work with big business, we prefer to work with the school system. That way we teach students, the next business generation, how to be cooperative and influence corporate America indirectly. Once people experience cooperation, they find out that it's a better, even easier way."

It seems that cooperation has an impact on individuals working together in several key areas. Not only does it create a more fluid leadership, but it allows everyone to participate actively without fear of censure. Cooperation also has an impact on an individual's perception of the work environment.

Another area directly impacted by cooperation is, perhaps surprisingly, health. A fascinating study conducted by the Cooperative Learning Center took a statistical look at competitive hockey players. The study examined the relation between cooperation/competition and mental and physical health. The Center evaluated 57 collegiate and semiprofessional ice-hockey players (aged 18-29 years) trying out for the 1980 Olympic team. Using sophisticated personality measures and a social-interaction scale, the researchers found that cooperation does much more than help people get along.

In this study, the more cooperative individuals were better adjusted psychologically and physically healthier than their more competitive colleagues. It seems that competition, or the constant feeling that you have to work against something, has unhealthy physical side effects. Cooperation, and other pro-social/unselfish behaviors, tend to have positive side effects.

To that point, limited evidence suggests that cooperation generates a type of "runner's high." Although the research is not definitive, it is promising. Like those individuals who exercise regularly, people who are cooperative and help others also experience a type of "high," which might better be described as calmness or sense of freedom from stress. As the researchers have shown, once this cooperation, not competition, is preferred.

Additionally, individuals who develop a cooperative stance tend to feel more in control of their lives and do not live for approval from others. They tend to feel good. This is in sharp contrast to the constant intensity of the competitive individual.

As with everything, too much of a good thing can be a problem. In the case of cooperation, as psychologists point out, too much can lead to "group-think," "yes-man syndrome," or inappropriate conformity.

Scott G. Isaksen, director for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State College in Buffalo, New York, explains, "If everyone is so caught up in cooperation with the other side that they lose a critical respect for the issue, they can all decide to do the wrong thing unanimously. Although
there's no doubt that a cooperative environment increases the number of ideas, improves the quality of the outcome, and facilitates a better working environment, cooperation must be done in such a way as to protect the integrity of the project at hand. Simply put, cooperation is the rule, but objectivity must be maintained.

There are ways to facilitate cooperation, and they are the same no matter the environment, from big business to peewee football.

1. **Focus on doing well.** Isaksen points out that attempting to do well and trying to beat others are two separate mental processes. It is impossible to concentrate on both. Of the two, cooperating with yourself and others to create a positive outcome has more rewards.

2. **Allow ample time.** Cooperation comes to a grinding halt as time pressures increase. Time pressures produce non-agreement, decreased information exchanges, and firmer negotiator demands. The perception of available time facilitates cooperation.

3. **Use similar language.** If someone is hoping you will cooperate with him or her on a particular venture, ask questions using the same words they used to describe the plan originally. Isaksen explains, "This creates what psychologists call 'congruence,' and you will appear to be more cooperative and interested even though you are critically challenging and gathering additional information.

4. **Share leadership.** Isaksen sees cooperation as a form of leadership, equally shared by all group members. By sharing the leadership, you allow others to take on initiative and to be integral parts of the group. There is an increased sense of "ownership" of plans and ideas by all members, and the work environment is pleasurable.

5. **Learn cooperative problem-solving tools.** Isaksen points out that these are really creativity tools by another name. For instance, he says, "A simple tool is brainstorming. What happens is that someone invites another to offer wild suggestions so that others can find ways in which they can tag along, create, or cooperate." Other techniques include suspending judgment, clarifying goals and objectives before seeking cooperation, and evaluating others' plans in a non-threatening manner.

6. **Practice reciprocity.** When someone helps you out, make it a point to help them. Express your gratitude by helping them before they expect it. A policy of general reciprocity - people helping people - facilitates cooperation. This particular technique has been shown empirically (especially in international studies) as one of the few ways to gain an adversary's cooperation.

7. **Share resources and information.** When people are vying for knowledge, work space, personnel, or anything to help them get the job done, cooperation decreases. Resource exchange, however, encourages one person to work with another.

8. **Reinforce team efforts.** Rather than praising one person for a job well done, utilize a team approach to problem solving. When the team does well, the entire group is rewarded. This minimizes individual competition, and maximizes cooperation. Distribute the rewards equally among group members.
9. **Act cooperatively.** Research supports the fact that individuals who have witnessed a cooperative act will "pass it on," sharing some degree of cooperation with the next person they meet. Anytime you help another person feel better, you have increased the probability that he or she will be cooperative toward you. As Isaksen summarizes, "Actions speak louder than words and encourage another person to cooperate with you."

10. **For your health's sake, experience cooperation.** Make it a point to notice how much better you feel when you cooperate with others. As the researchers suggest, once you experience the positive feelings, there seems to be no other way to work except cooperatively.

    Cooperation is a valuable commodity and works best when it is freely given and indirectly encouraged. It promotes goodwill toward men and women, and is a gift that is always appropriate.

And there's no better time to be cooperative. After all, 'tis the season.

**REFERENCES**


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Perry W. Buffington, Ph.D., better known to his students as “Dr. Buff,” is a licensed psychologist with over 20 years of private-practice, consulting experience who teaches a number of psychology courses as an adjunct professor with the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences’ program on the UGA Griffin Campus. He earned his B.A. degree with a double major in history and psychology from Georgia Southern University, his M.A. in Counselor Education from the University of Georgia, and his Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Kentucky. A few years back, he returned to the classroom himself as a student completing his M.S. in Clinical Psychopharmacology, finished internships associated with this new degree, and passed the Psychopharmacology Examination for Psychologists (PEP).

Currently, Dr. Buffington divides his time between his practice and the classroom, teaching psychology courses such as PSYC 3230 Abnormal Psychology, PSYC 3300 Social and Personality Development, PSYC 3810 Psychology of Health, and his specialty, PSYC 5850 Psychopharmacology.

Dr. Buffington has thirteen books and numerous refereed journal articles to his credit, and he has also penned thousands of articles in periodicals, mainly as a contributing editor for Delta Air Lines’ in-flight magazine, Sky, and a syndicated columnist with Universal Press.

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