

Cooperation Instead of Competition

The report below represents a summary of the book by Alfie Kohn,

“No Contest: The Case Against Competition; Why we lose in our race to win”

“No Contest”, which has been stirring up controversy since its publication in 1986, stands as the definitive critique of competition. Drawing from hundreds of studies, Alfie Kohn eloquently argues that our struggle to defeat each other -- at work, at school, at play, and at home -- turns all of us into losers.

This book supports the conviction of W. Edwards Deming which appears in one of his best known quotes:

"Stop fighting for a bigger piece of the pie. Instead cooperate to make the pie bigger. Then everybody wins."

Selected Recognitions

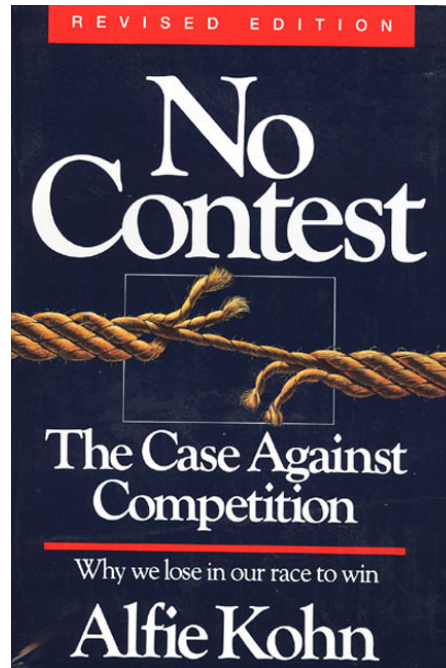
"We have been in prison from wrong teaching. By perceiving that cooperation is the answer, not competition, Alfie Kohn opens a new world of living. I am deeply indebted to him." (W. Edwards Deming, management consultant)

"A really impressive piece of work. Challenging and thoughtful, it reaches to the heart of many problems of our social life and the ideology that constrains and distorts it." (Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

"A brilliant debunking of America's most sacred cow. Kohn demolishes the myths of competition decisively and irrefutably." (Philip Slater, sociologist, author of *The Pursuit of Loneliness*)

"Well researched and sound, *No Contest* exposes erroneous assumptions about the inevitability and value of competition. This book . . . deserves our attention." (Carl Rogers, psychologist)

"Alfie Kohn marshals the evidence that



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[competition] is not the main spring of achievement in industry, the arts, education, or games." (Dr. Benjamin Spock, pediatrician)

"No Contest has already changed the way many of us think about competition. The second edition is even better, with a new chapter on cooperation in the classroom that is thorough, informative, even brilliant. Anyone who cares about education and children will find reading this book a necessity; it will reframe the educational debate. Even people with years of experience as educators and researchers will be challenged by this book - as I was." (David W. Johnson, Cooperative Learning Center, University of Minnesota)



Alfie Kohn

Alfie Kohn writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and social theory. In addition to *No Contest*, he is the author of *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* and *You Know What They Say. . . : The Truth About Popular Beliefs*.

His articles have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, and dozens of other popular magazines and academic journals.

A former teacher, he now lectures at universities and to teachers, managers, and parents across the country.

Kohn was educated at Brown University and the University of Chicago. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Summary

- "We need competition in order to survive."
- "Life is boring without competition."
- "It is competition that gives us meaning in life."

These words written by university students capture a sentiment that runs through the heart of Europe and the USA and appears to be spreading throughout the entire world.

To these students, competition is not simply something one does, it is the very essence of existence. When asked to imagine a world without competition, they can foresee only rising prices, declining productivity and a general collapse of the moral order. Some truly believe we would cease to exist were it not for competition.

Alfie Kohn, author of "*No contest: The Case Against Competition*", disagrees completely and at the same time rejects one of the most cherished "Sacred Cows" of Western economies. "*No Contest*", which has been stirring up controversy since its publication in 1986, stands as the definitive critique of competition.

Drawing from hundreds of studies, Alfie Kohn eloquently argues that our struggle to defeat each other -- at work, at school, at play, and at home -- turns all of us into losers.

Contrary to the myths with which we have been raised, Kohn shows that competition is not an inevitable part of "human nature." It does not motivate us to do our best (in fact, the reason our workplaces and schools are in trouble is that they value competitiveness instead of excellence.) Rather than building character, competition sabotages self-esteem and ruins relationships. It even warps recreation by turning the playing field into a battlefield.

"*No Contest*" makes a powerful case that "healthy competition" is a contradiction in terms. Because any win/lose arrangement is undesirable, we will have to restructure our institutions for the benefit of ourselves, our children, and our society.

Competition is a product of the antisystemic thinking pretending that total performance of an entity is the sum of the performances of its parts. In systems this is no longer true. The performance of a system is the product of the interactions of the components, which can shown to be

always better than the sum of the individual contributions. Competition destroys and cooperation activates the full potential of systems.

Managers are invited to throw over board long held prejudices and consider the well founded arguments presented by Alfie Kohn. The book may hurt at first, but give it a chance to learn for yourself, whether it does not change your world and your relationships for the better.

Introduction

Vince Lombardi, American sports icon, head coach of the first two Super Bowl champions, and the man for whom the Super Bowl trophy is named, may be best remembered for saying:

"Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

This quote has become the rallying cry for our competitive society.

What is not widely known is that Lombardi regretted ever having made that statement. He said about it:

"I wish to hell I'd never said the damned thing. I meant having a goal.... I sure as hell didn't mean for people to crush human values and morality."

Kohn wants the readers to examine, perhaps for the first time, the long held, culturally endorsed belief, that competition is good and competitiveness is a virtue. This may be a difficult thing to hear. Humans have been trained not only to compete but to believe in competition. Some may feel angry. They may feel attacked. They may have defined themselves with pride as "a competitor". They are accomplishing what society urges them to accomplish. They may see a challenge to the value of competition as a challenge to their own value.

Some people may be afraid of a challenge to the value of competition. Whether or not they are comfortable with or believe in competition, it is what they are familiar with and a challenge to the known often raises a fear of the unknown.

Some people find joy in a challenge to the value of competition. They may have been uncomfortable with competition but, because of societal pressures, considered themselves abnormal for not accepting and valuing competition.

Definition of Competition

Kohn defines competition as any situation where one person's success is dependent upon another's failure.

Put another way, in competition two or more parties are pursuing a goal that cannot be attained by all. He calls this "**Mutually Exclusive Goal Attainment**" (**MEGA**).

Kohn goes on to define two distinct types of competition. In "structural competition" MEGA is an explicit, defining element in the nature of the interaction. For instance in a game of tennis there can be only one winner. The same is true of beauty contests, presidential elections, and wars. Everyone knows they are out to beat the others though the rules of engagement may vary considerably between events.

"Intentional competition" is a state of mind, an individual's competitiveness or his proclivity for besting others. Anyone can go to a party determined to establish him or herself as the most intelligent, the most attractive, etc. Similarly, in school, the work place, and on teams people can try to beat others whether or not anyone is formally keeping score and declaring winners and losers.

One place where competition cannot exist, according to Kohn, is within oneself. Such striving to better one's own standing is an individual, not interactive matter; it does not involve MEGA. Of course some people cannot imagine pushing themselves without the possibility of "winning" or the threat of "losing", but this by no means implies that all motivation is dependent upon competitive frameworks. Throughout history countless large and small accomplishments have been achieved simply out of an individual's desire to do better without any thought of beating others. Such striving for mastery cannot be confused with competition.

The Case for Competition

The case for competition rests on the following four myths:

- Competition is unavoidable (it is human nature).
- Competition is more productive than other forms of social interactions.
- Competition is more enjoyable than other forms of social interactions.

- Competition builds character and self-confidence.

Of the three approaches we can take to reaching our goals, working independently, competitively, or cooperatively, it will be shown that cooperation is the most successful, psychologically healthy and conducive to liking one another.

Myth Nr. 1: Competition is Human Nature

This is the standard argument for the status quo. This argument removes freedom of choice and any possibility of debate. It is the argument that has been used in the past for racism and for sexism, and is the one used today for speciesism. What is most interesting about this position is that no case has been made for it. The claim rests on appeal alone.

The opposing position, that it is not human nature to compete, has several arguments to support it.

Cooperation is included in the idea of society.

The vast majority of human interaction is not competitive but cooperative. The tendency to cooperate has been found among toddlers and infants suggesting that if we are genetically competitive we are also genetically cooperative.

Natural selection does not require competition.

To be fair, since humans overlay our physiology with the powerful influence of culture, strictly looking at natural selection is inadequate. However, it is suggestive. Consider what the following zoologists have said about natural selection:

Stephen Jay Gould: "The equation of competition with success in natural selection is merely a cultural prejudice."

George Gaylord Simpson: "Struggle is sometimes involved, but usually it is not, and when it is, it may even work against rather than toward natural selection."

Marvin Bates: "This competition, this 'struggle', is a superficial thing, superimposed on an essential mutual dependence."

Mens view of competition is projected to the rest of the natural world.

We tend to misuse the word and describe as "competition" the phenomena of one species displacing another in a particular environment when the former species is or becomes better adapted to changes in that

environment. It doesn't occur to us that animals tend to live in cooperative groups despite the much greater risk of spreading infections and the much greater demand on resources.

Petr Kropotkin: "...competition...is limited among animals to exceptional periods.... Better conditions are created by the elimination of competition by means of mutual aid and mutual support... "Don't compete!-competition is always injurious to the species, and you have plenty of resources to avoid it!"

That is the tendency of nature, not always realized in full, but always present. That is the watchword which comes to us from the bush, the forest, the river, the ocean. "Therefore combine-- practice mutual aid!..." That is what Nature teaches us."

Our View of competition was imposed to us by society.

We are competitive, not because we were born that way, but because we learned it. That is the conclusion of the great majority of theorists and researchers. We've learned competition: Through school where cooperative effort is equated with cheating and we use the word "cooperation" to mean "obedience". "You're not being very cooperative!" Schools enforce these structures and meanings even though when given a choice, students of all grades choose cooperative games over competitive ones and grading for cooperative effort.

In the nuclear family, we make our children compete for our attention and our love as we had to compete for that of our parents. "Who's daddy's best little girl?" We get in win/lose struggles with our children who are trying to find and understand limits. We often know better than they what is best for them, and we often convey it in a dictatorial fashion. We get our way --we win-- the child perceives it as a loss. Those two learning environments, school and family, cover most of our formative years.

Our View of Competition is self-perpetuating.

Competition is with us not because it has to be but because it is self-perpetuating. Any mode of social interaction breeds more of itself or it ceases to be a mode of social interaction.

Some psychologists, following Martin Hoffman, believe humans have an inborn "empathic distress" response. This is even seen in newborns. Two day old infants in hospital nurseries often become agitated and cry at the sound of another infant's

cry, much more so than at other sounds. Empathic distress is so unpleasant that children are driven to help others in order to reduce it.

If competitiveness was human nature, we wouldn't find non-competitive societies -- but we do! Many subsahara African, east Asian, and Native American Indian societies were and are non-competitive. In fact, ours is a uniquely competitive culture. The United States is the most violent industrial country.

Margaret Mead, in *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples* concluded:

"Competitive and cooperative behaviour on the part of individual members of a society is fundamentally conditioned by the total social emphasis of that society... That is, competitiveness is not nature but nurture. It is not the presence or absence of resources that determines a society's competitiveness, but its cultural norms."

We can conclude that competition is not necessary! The next question is, "Is it desirable?"

Myth Nr. 2: Competition is More Productive than other Forms of Human Interactions

The obvious futility of wasting one's energy preventing another from winning provides the starting point for Kohn's critique of competition's contribution to productivity. "Good competitors" don't see themselves as wasting energy in thinking about another's performance, but considerable research evidence suggests that they may be.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s a team of researchers at the University of Texas set out to identify the personality characteristics that correlated with the highest levels of professional performance. They reasoned that striving for mastery, a positive attitude toward work, and competitiveness would all correlate positively with achievement.

When the first study was run with Ph.D. scientists (achievement measured by how often their published papers were cited) the results were surprising. High levels of mastery and work orientation were found among the highest achievers, but these top achievers showed low levels of competitiveness.

To test the result, many more studies were conducted, each time using a different sample of subjects (businessmen, college students, airline reservation agents, and grade school students), and each time the same result was found. Competitiveness consistently correlated negatively with achievement. That is, those high in achievement were low in competitiveness.

But beyond the analysis of individual differences, a more important issue concerns whether competitive or cooperative structures draw out the best work from those within them.

Here again the research evidence runs contrary to popular assumptions. Kohn cites one review of 109 studies on the question: "Sixty-five studies found that cooperation promotes higher achievement than competition, eight found the reverse, and 36 found no statistically significant difference."

What we learn from these studies is that intentional competition is associated with lower performance.

A study showed that women are better managers, better bosses, because they are less competitive. They are leaders, team players, colleagues, facilitators, employee advocates and consensus builders. They treat the men and women who work for them as equals. They don't use power to control others. They listen. They encourage. They nurture.

In sum, to change the competitive nature of society will require a major step in consciousness. It is one thing to say "I don't like competition," and it is quite another to root out its origins within the psyche and to change our structures of work and play.

If these changes are to constitute the foundation of the new age, Kohn's book could be a tremendously useful tool in the work ahead. It provides a clear mirror within which to see unchallenged popular assumptions about life. It invites the reader to build a new society in thought and deed.

Why does competition fail? One reason it fails is because trying to do well and trying to beat others are two different things and they are experienced differently. Success in achieving a goal does not depend on winning over others just as failing to achieve a goal does not mean losing to others.

Competitive success is an extrinsic motivator and extrinsic motivation undermines intrinsic motivation.

Did you ever have something, maybe a hobby, that you enjoyed doing then somehow an extrinsic motivation became tied to it? Perhaps people started paying you to do it. Did it start to become less fun? Did your performance suffer?

Extrinsic motivation negatively impacts long-term performance. High performing individuals are intrinsically motivated.

High performance is voluntary. You cannot beat high performance out of someone with a stick nor tempt it out with a carrot. It is the fire in the belly, the inner drive that leads to high performance.

The performance of systems exceeds the sum of the performance of the elements. It is the product of their interactions. Closely cooperating teams, therefore, always outperform competing individuals. Cooperation enables coordination of effort and division of labour. In a cooperative environment, it is safe to explore problems, take risks, and play with possibilities.

Myth Nr. 3: Competition is More Enjoyable than other Forms of Human Interactions

Kohn begins his examination of competitive games by defining "play": something that is all about process, where outcomes matter not at all.

The master aphorist G.K. Chesterton perfectly captured the spirit of play when he said: "If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly."

Obviously this notion of play is directly opposed to the spirit of sports today.

We "play to win" -- without the slightest sense of the contradiction inherent in the phrase.

Play is a voluntarily chosen, pleasing activity. It is an end in itself. Play frees us from seriousness. Results do not matter if we love what we are doing for its own sake.

The wit G.K. Chesterton said; "If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly." Think about it. If a thing is worth doing at all, stop--end of clause. It is worth doing. It is worth doing good, bad, or ugly. It is worth doing, we just said it was. Play is like that. Activities we love doing for their own sake are like that.

If we associate rules with an activity, that activity becomes less playful. If it becomes product-oriented or otherwise extrin-

sically motivated, the activity is no longer play.

Bertrand Russell wrote: "It is not only work that is poisoned by the philosophy of competition, leisure is poisoned just as much."

Competition, structural or attitudinal, involves extrinsic motivation. Winning is the goal and rules are defined to determine who wins. Our leisure, when we compete, is no longer play.

Myth Nr. 4: Competition Builds Character and Self-Esteem

Research has exploded the claim that competition builds character.

Studies have found: While people look to competition to help them feel good about themselves, the research shows it doesn't work.

Why not? Competition fails to allay the self-doubt that gave rise to it because: In practice, most people lose. In most competitions in which we are involved, there are more losers than winners. Further, when we lose, we lose big since most competitions are public events. The more important winning is, the more destructive losing will be. Our society places high importance on winning. We equate losing with being a loser, and being a loser is about the worst thing you could be.

Even when we win, victory is never permanent. It is a shaky ground on which to base our self-esteem.

Winning doesn't establish competency. We can win a competition in some area, but not be competent in what we did and maybe we know we aren't competent. If others complement or recognize us for this win, we feel in some way we are lying to them. We won but we didn't do well. This sense of dishonesty negatively impacts our self-esteem.

Being number 1 with respect to a quality can never satisfy the need for which it stands. That is, we want to be assured we are fundamentally good. Temporal success in one area doesn't do it.

Society presents us with a cure-all for our neediness. Winning! If you could win, if you could be number one, you'd be popular, sexy, successful, acclaimed. Anything you could ever want.

Fortunately, by its very nature, competition limits the number of people who could

find their high in it. If you lose often when you compete, as many people will, you won't likely keep coming back to it and find yourself in the downward spiral of addiction.

Unfortunately, many of us find a vicarious thrill living through the competitive success of our sports heroes and heroines. It feels safer, we have less at stake when we are fans rather than competitors. So we fund and perpetuate this poison that is competition even though this once-removed competitiveness suffers from all the problems we have been describing.

Now let's consider another unattractive aspect of competition; its link with cheating.

Pick a field in which people are competing and we'll find there are people going outside the boundaries:

In sports, both pro and "amateur" we find steroids, point shaving, recruitment violations, little leaguers using false ages and addresses.

In politics we find smears, bribes, illegal contributions, spying, lying, wiretaps.

In business we find bribes, sabotage, price fixing and an explosion of corporate greed beyond anything that could have been imagined just a few years ago. Manager greed lost any connection to reality and turned into a competitive game for managers to see, who could squeeze more money out of ailing corporations.

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