

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the characteristics of:

Friendly Competition

Mention the word “competition,” and what comes to mind? Athletic competition. You may be a fan of baseball, or badminton, or NASCAR. Regardless, “competition” is, if only implicitly, short for some kind of sports competition. And this kind of competition can motivate.

Indeed, we often attempt to capitalize on the motivation of competition in non-athletic circumstances. The benefits of our free-enterprise system derive from the inherent competition among firms. And, we try to introduce the motivational benefits of competition into government by offering prizes for excellent schools or bonuses for excellent employees.

Competition motivates the competitors to try to win—to win whatever prize (or mere recognition) comes from winning. At least, it motivates those who think they have a chance of winning. Andre Agassi explained how competition motivated him: “It has meant a lot to me to challenge the best players in the world and to beat them. And it means a lot to me to be out here and fighting for the title and, you know, it hurts not to win it.”

But how motivated are the individuals who play for the San Diego Chargers? Nine weeks into the National Football League’s 2003 season, this team has won one game and lost eight. The Chargers are not going to win the Super Bowl. The Chargers are not going to

make the playoffs. They will be lucky to win two of their 16 games. And they know it.

Their coach may try to tell them differently. But they know. Every single player knows—and so does every single member of every player’s family. The Chargers are dead. The team’s chance of winning anything that might be legitimately called “winning” is zero. They aren’t fighting for the title. They do not expect to challenge the world’s best football players and beat them.



So how motivated are the Chargers’ players to win their next game? How willing is any individual to do something great for the team? Sure, each player is motivated to do things that will make him look good—to do things that can earn him a job next year, preferably with a better team. But no player is going to sacrifice very much for the good of this team. No one is going to jeopardize his future to help the team win. They are primarily motivated to survive for another year.

Johns Hopkins University is noted for its research particularly that of its medical school faculty. In addition, undergraduate competition at this university has added a word to our vocabulary: “throating.”

For students don’t just go to Johns Hopkins’ School of Medicine. Undergraduates go to its School of Arts and Sciences so that

they can then get into a medical school. And here the competition is fierce. After all, only a fixed number of Johns Hopkins pre-med students will be accepted by Harvard or Duke.

Thus, competition among pre-med students can be ruthless. Students have been known to steal a classmate's notes or even to sabotage someone's laboratory experiment. This is "throating."

Such an absence of cooperation is another consequence of the fixed-sum competition. If the number of winners is strictly limited to either one or a few, competition can indeed become cutthroat. For if *you* do win, *my* chances of winning decrease—perhaps to zero.

In sports, this is great. We don't want the teams to cooperate. We want them to compete. If two teams cooperated, we would call it collusion. This is why the bonus that baseball players earn by playing in the World Series is based only on the receipts of the first four (of the possible seven) games; we don't want to encourage the players on these two teams to cooperate and make sure that the Series goes a full seven games, just so they can each earn a bigger bonus. We want the competition to be cutthroat. It makes for great entertainment.

But in the public sector, we often want to encourage cooperation not cutthroat competition. For example, we don't want just one school district in our state to win. We want every school—and thus every student—to win. Still, we often create a fixed-sum competition.

For example, a state can create competition among its schools and school districts by awarding some kind of prize to, say, the top 20 percent of the schools based on some criteria—such as their test scores (or some kind of adjusted test scores, or their gain in test scores). This is competition. This is American.

Yet whom does this competition motivate? How much does it motivate the San Diego Chargers of a state's school systems. If the superintendent, principals, teachers, students and parents know that they have zero chance of winning, how motivated will they be?

And what kind of behavior does this competition motivate? What about a school that barely won last year and has a chance to win again this year? Will this school's teachers be motivated to share the reasons for their success with other schools?

Friendly competition is competition not against other teams but against a target. Thus, it not only motivates everyone to try to win. It also motivates them to help other teams to win—for doing so does not hurt their own chances of winning.

Competition can, however, be cooperative. Competitors may be quite willing to divulge their secrets. But only if doing so does not inhibit their own ability to win.

To create such "friendly competition," you need to give every team a chance to win. You need to give each team its own performance target. Different teams can, for any number of reasons, have different targets, but they do need to be fair. Then, whenever a team achieves its own target, it wins. And it need not worry that, by helping other teams also be successful, it will hurt its chances of winning.

This "friendly competition" not only motivates individual teams to improve performance; it also motivates them to cooperate. **B**

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