



On why all public officials need to

“What were they thinking?”
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Discourage “Throating”

It was a couple of years ago (okay, maybe a couple of decades ago), when my wife and I took our son, then a high-school student, on the pre-college tour. We visited a variety of campuses from coast to coast (and in Canada too). At the beginning of the fall semester, we ended up in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University.

The freshmen had just arrived, and the first edition of the student newspaper was displayed on its racks. I picked up a copy.

For the freshmen, the paper had a very practical section listing all of the unofficial Johns Hopkins slang words they needed to know to sound cool and—more importantly—to avoid appearing clueless.

My attention was quickly caught by one of these words: “throating,” as in the verb “to throat.” Throating is primarily an occupation of pre-med students, though any student could engage in this behavior.

To “throat” is to directly hinder or hurt other students’ performance. Any student can throat an individual student or an entire class.

For example, a “Throat” (a student who engages in throating) might sabotage another student’s lab experiment or destroy yet another’s notes.

Or the Throat could do this to everyone by stealing key books from the library or even by cutting an essential article out of a journal or an important chapter from a book.

Why would pre-med students at Johns Hopkins (or any college) engage in such cutthroat behavior? Because they are competing directly with each classmate for admission to the most prestigious medical schools. Each medical school will admit only a very few of Johns Hopkins’ pre-med students. Thus the competition is “zero-sum”: If you win, I must lose.

At Johns Hopkins, I am told, the practice of throating has disappeared. Certainly, I hope so.

Nevertheless, there do exist competitive circumstances in which some

people may conclude (regardless of what their mother taught them, or what approach to ethics they studied) that sabotage is (if not ethically acceptable) obviously expedient.

For example: when the number of undergraduates who will be accepted by a medical school is strictly limited to a small number of applicants. Or when the number of senior managers who can be promoted to vice president is strictly limited to a small number. Or when everyone knows that the number of cookies, or gold stars, or ribbons, or goodies (or other forms of recognition) are, again, strictly limited to a small number.

This is not, however, always the case. In other competitive situations, a would-be saboteur will gain absolutely nothing:

Suppose every pre-med student at Johns Hopkins who was qualified—

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who, for example, passed some kind of medical-school admission test—was admitted to a high-quality medical school. If this was the case, no student would gain any advantage by throating any other student.

In fact, in this situation, all students could benefit from helping their colleagues. For if helping colleagues fostered a norm of reciprocal cooperation, every student at Johns Hopkins would benefit. Such cooperation would improve everyone’s ability to pass the medical-school admissions test—and thus get into a high-quality medical school.

Inherently, however, the number of places in the entering classes of top-

ranking medical schools is limited. Thus, pre-med students will always be competing with other students—particularly with students from their own college—for one of these precious spots.

This, however, is not always the case. Or, at least, it doesn’t have to be. There are times when the number of rewards—be they cookies or gold stars—is not inherently limited. And yet, for some reason, those who create the reward structure think it is—or, at least, that it should be very limited.

This is competition, and our mental model for competition is athletics: At the end of the season, there is just one winner. Everyone else is a loser.

Is, however, this mental model always appropriate? Do we want only one school to be a winner—while all of the others are declared to be losers? Do we want only one child-welfare manager to be a winner—while all the other managers are labeled as losers?

If we want all schools, and all managers to be successful, why do we create a structure of rewards that actually encourages those who have a chance to win to engage in throating, or, at least, to avoid helping their colleagues? And why do we create a structure of rewards that encourages those who know they have no chance of winning to stop trying? Why do only the top 20% of schools get to display a winners flag? Why do only the top 20% of managers get the (miniscule) bonus?

Isn’t it possible to design a reward structure that discourages throating? Isn’t it possible to design a reward structure that positively encourages people to cooperate? **B**

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