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Competition - It Is All In How We Play The Game...

By Jill Kanter

A little mindfulness goes a long way.

Whether we're corporate executives, small business owners or currently in career transition, most of us are faced with the daily need to compete. And while healthy competition can lead to many positive outcomes—including achieving our best—we're often consumed with the more negative aspects, like comparing ourselves to others in unhealthy ways. Today's businesswomen can feel immense pressure to "measure up," haunted by questions that even the most successful find anxiety-provoking:

- Have we really achieved enough in our careers?
- Are we earning what we should be at this stage in our lives?
- Are we spending enough "downtime" with our families?
- Do we have strong enough connections to the powerful people in our field?
- Are we perceived as smart enough?, well-spoken enough?, politically savvy enough?, well-dressed enough?!

The list goes on...

While it's important to be conscious of how we're doing, it's easy to fall prey to self-doubt, especially when we judge ourselves against unrealistic standards. And once self-doubt sets in, emotions like anger, resentment and jealousy are never far behind. Competition that could offer us an invigorating stretch becomes one more stroll down "I'm Not Good Enough Lane."

See if this situation sounds familiar. An important meeting is about to start, and you want to perform at your best. Another manager with whom you're competing for a new project enters the room. The meeting starts, and she's really on a roll—everything she says seems either brilliant or very funny. It becomes quite clear "the room is hers"—even you really like her. Although you try to stay present, you slowly drift down the road to hell, comparing yourself to her without mercy.

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Before you know it, 10 minutes have passed, and you lost in every single category as you silently note everything from her creative talent to her wardrobe. Then suddenly, someone asks your opinion, and all eyes turn to you. It's your moment, and you're so self-conscious you can barely think. A thin veil has formed inside, and you can't connect with your inner power. This isn't something we'd want to experience even once, never mind regularly. But how do we compete in a healthy way? And how can we experience ourselves as *completely* enough?

Making A Shift...

One of the best ways to approach competition, and take good care of ourselves in the process, involves drawing on what I call the "basic truths." These are age-old principles, which, when remembered and applied, have the power to calm even the most tortured mind. In fact, they can support our very best performance. Below are three basic truths I find particularly helpful, especially in competitive situations.

Basic Truth #1: We always have within us just what it takes, no matter how things appear.

I recently met with a client who was stressed by a tough new challenge: to step in and manage a major project with a group of employees who were steeped in conflict. Initially, she felt overwhelmed, as the stakes were high. But as we worked together, she began to recall her success with similar challenges in previous projects. As she focused on the concrete ways she'd handled those situations, she stopped worrying about all that could go wrong with her new project. She also realized that she had the resources within herself to handle whatever came up in the future.

As most of us know, it's only through grappling with our countless challenges that we become stronger. It's just as important to remember, though, that whether or not we win a competition, the growth is always ours to take home.

Basic Truth #2: Everything always works out for the best—eventually.

One of my clients who was hoping for a promotion was very disappointed when one of her peers was selected, and suddenly became her new boss. Several months later, when the dust settled, however, things looked a bit brighter. She'd been given her "dream project" as incentive to stay on board, and also felt more comfortable actually taking her vacation time. Her new boss, on the other hand, seemed to be working an inordinate number of hours, trying to meet new management expectations.

After working with hundreds of clients in competitive situations, I've come to believe that each of us has our own unique destiny. While it's true that everyone can't win the same coveted prize, we each have full access to the opportunities that are meant for us.

Basic Truth #3: Sharing with others brings the greatest joy.

A few years ago, I decided to start a peer coaching group. I invited three of the strongest, most talented and evolved colleagues I knew to join—basically, my toughest competition. Even with firm belief in all three truths, it took extra faith to envision four competitors really helping each other.

Now we meet monthly to share our challenges and receive each other's priceless help. Through two years of deepening connection, the group has given each of us more than we'd hoped. I've grown in ways—many unexpected—that never

would have been possible without my peers' support. Mostly, I've learned that there's a lot to gain by being vulnerable with trustworthy people who really care. I've also found that supporting others—especially competitors—provides an experience of abundance unlike any other.

I encourage clients to keep these basic truths “top of mind” (it helps to keep them “top of desk,” and anywhere else you're likely to see them). You can repeat any one of them in your mind whenever you lose your competitive balance. Most importantly, though, remember that according to these basic truths, there really is no such thing as competition—only unique challenges that facilitate growth.

Jill Kanter is a management consultant, speaker and writer with expertise in leadership development, team effectiveness and organizational change. She brings a strong practical approach and highly developed intuition to projects incorporating executive coaching, team development, workplace improvement and the management of change.

Jill has worked extensively with clients in large, dynamic organizations in the financial services, hospital, healthcare, telecommunications, and high-tech industries, as well as institutions of higher education and a variety of non-profits. She founded her firm in 1990, after earning her Ed.M. from Harvard University. She can be reached at 617-469-0100 or jdk@jillkanter.com.

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