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The Dark Side of Competition

Title of Paper: **Co-Opetition: The Boundary Between Competition and Cooperation**

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Co-Opetition: The Boundary Between Competition and Cooperation

I propose in this paper to examine and deconstruct the notion of competition in groups, to examine what aspects of competition are useful and “healthy”, and what, on the other hand, turns competitiveness into a destructive force. I shall also explore the conditions that make cooperation possible and successful in a group. When does cooperation mask an underlying competitiveness? I shall draw on thinking in philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature, and draw illustrations from my practice in consulting with groups.

I want to explore and examine the way forces of competition and cooperation can be seen at play in organizations I have worked with, and ask how competitiveness and cooperation can be suitably interwoven into a state of co-opetition, where competition and cooperation play with and against one another to achieve a balance which provides the desirable effects of each for the group, in the process creating an energized and effective group.

It is this notion of co-opetition which describes the dynamic play of the opposing forces of competition and cooperation. Competition and cooperation can be conceived of as vectors of energy and direction. When either one is repressed, neglected or ignored, it is likely that the other will not be allowed its effective free play. For example, in certain non-profit groups, set up to do good works, competitiveness is sometimes repressed, leading to an energy stasis in the group. Sometimes, in for-profit organizations, unfettered competitiveness can lead to the unleashing of destructive forces, even to a culture of war (as Sievers illustrates in his article referenced below).

Competition is always in play in social groups, both large and small. In order to compete effectively, I must recognize the otherness of the other and appreciate all his/her strengths and weaknesses so that I can apply myself appropriately in relation to that other. To subsume the other within my own frame of reference would be narcissistic and narrowly self-serving. This might be seen as pathological in psychoanalytic terms. But, in relation to the ability to compete it would be debilitating. So the ability to compete with another, who is more or less equally matched in the aspects in which we choose to compete, is a sign of recognition of the other in all aspects of her uniqueness.

Much socio-political theory is spun off from the assumption that competition drives all players to improve through being more adept and creative. The concept of the “free market” is taken almost as holy dogma by many western economists. On the other hand, certain authoritarian regimes argue that competition creates unnecessary strife between members of the society. In the history of western philosophy, there is little written on the subject of competition as such. This is also true, as far as I know, of the psychoanalytic literature. However, much has been said in an indirect way concerning “good” and “bad”

competition, and how that compares with cooperation. I shall explore some concepts from philosophy, starting with Plato's Republic, which purports to be an examination of the ideal state, where competition is appropriately regulated. Nietzsche seems to emphasize the role of competition in all aspects of life and thought within his notion of "Will to power". We can use the insights from philosophers to look again at the concepts surrounding competition in present-day society. Looking again at the way "free competition" is portrayed by certain politicians and theorists of the modern globalized capitalist economy, we can ask whether there is any such thing as free competition and free markets at all, or if these concepts are not just a fiction to justify a certain hegemonic tendency.

In order to unravel the play of competition and cooperation in small groups, we can look to insights gained from psychoanalysis. I shall explore how we can use Freud's delineation of the Oedipal structure as an example of how unresolved psychological forces can be brought to play to drive an individual to compete inappropriately. In addition, we can draw insight from Kleinian theory – where one person projects aspects of self onto another, then that other is not seen as an independent other, but merely as an aspect of self's own psychic makeup. This may well lead to destructive interactions between the individuals involved. The conclusion from psychoanalysis here would be that becoming aware of projective forces will help "cure" the situation.

However, helping an individual become more aware of an Other as she/he really is does not guarantee that she/he will then treat that other person well, or compete fairly, etc. This brings us to consider issues of ethics and what can be done, if anything, to ensure ethical behavior between members of a group.

On the other hand, where all competition is stifled – as it is in certain authoritarian and totalitarian societies, freedom to experiment and creativity are necessarily reduced, leading to reduced performance of the group. A group may in some way decide to suppress all aspects of competition, and the problems that such competitiveness might entail, by adopting a strategy where all group members "agree" to regard themselves as "the same". This generally occurs on the unconscious level. We could regard Bion's basic assumption groups as groups which have become stuck in such a state of "agreement", have reached a stasis, where each individual is no longer seen as, or acts as an individual, but rather acts according to the "ideological theme" of the basic assumption – whichever type of basic assumption that is. Aggressive drives which may be put to play in competitiveness are instead subverted, and will be transformed into a symptom destructive to the group, and possibly also for anyone the group interacts with.

I shall ask participants in this seminar to participate in discussion and also possibly an experiential exercise to explore the actions and effects of competition and cooperation.

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