

Competition: some reflections on its archetypical roots and its effects on today's organizations

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All organizations are experiencing competition in some kind of form. It is an important factor influencing organizational life. There are many different ways in which companies participate in competition. Reflecting on our management consulting work, with the issue of competition in mind, it appeared to us that organizations can be pigeonholed into two categories in terms of how they live (up) to competition. In the first category, fighting, beating and overtaking the “enemy” dominate corporate culture (e.g. Vodafone). In organizations in the other category “sporting”, inventing and beating the competition in a more imaginative way, seem to dominate (e.g. Apple).

Ambiguity seems to be at the heart of competition. This ambiguity could be the cause of the controversy and splitting in the public debate on the merit of competition. We have asked ourselves about the nature of this ambiguity and whether it may explain the fascinating power of it. This led to the question how these two categories are related to each other from a psychodynamic perspective. Are there for example correspondences or hidden links between these two seemingly different *modi operandi*?

Using Jung's concepts of archetypes and complexes, we introduce the idea that competition is an archetype which is at the core of two organizational complexes corresponding to the two categories mentioned above. The first complex we call the *war-complex* and it describes the dynamics within the companies of the first category. The other complex, we named the *game-complex* which corresponds to the second category. In analytical psychology, complexes in human beings are believed to have an archetype at their heart. The organizational equivalent which we propose is that the *war-complex* and *game-complex* can be seen as two opposite poles of the competition archetype. The archetype is the organizing principle which holds these opposites. The complexes may hold the companies in obsessed or even possessed positions.

This paper starts by giving a short introduction of these concepts and how they may be applied to the psychoanalytical understanding of organizations. We will describe the architecture of both complexes; we will look at the organizational functions that may be impaired in cases where the complex holds the organization its grip. We will illustrate both complexes by giving some examples from different industries. Finally, we will propose some interventions which may help companies of both categories to become more conscious of the risks involved.

Recognition of the power of the archetype and dissolving the complexes may lead to less fragmented organizations and therefore to organizational development. It may also help management to broaden the range of strategic options and to unlock unexploited growth potential within the company.

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