

COMPARISON: YOU SHOW ME YOURS



Managers are taught to reinforce desirable behaviors that enable employees to do better than expected with "atta-boy" feedback and incentives. But *any* comparison can be corrosive.

To better understand the dynamics of business meetings, go meet some horses. That's what Betsy did years ago, driving about an hour from Los Angeles to a ranch raising Arabians. In a grassy meadow fenced by chain-link was the star of the stable, a noble white stallion. From the far side of the enclosure, he cantered over, tossing his head, until he came within a yard or two of Betsy and her two friends. Then, he turned, eyed them balefully and, with precision, gave them a full view of that which earned him high stud fees; re-settled himself and pranced away.

Coincidentally, at about the same time, popular discourse offered theories of how men and women operate differently in business. At a first meeting, it was said, women seek to uncover what they have in common: someone they know, someplace they've been, something they've done; pulling through a thread of shared experience, they began to weave a dialogue. Men, on the other hand, test themselves against each other; in a "you-show-me-yours-and-I'll-show-you-mine" mode, like our Arabian champion, they establish ground rules for their interaction.

These approaches, however different they seem, are actually two sides of the same coin: comparison. Business-as-usual is replete with comparison. To motivate workers, we reward "the best" with bonuses; "the weakest links" get, when worse comes to worst, severance packages. When our company needs to develop a new product, we create a contest, pitting teams against each other; whichever comes up with the best idea gets a prize. To prove we're "best in class," we submit projects for industry awards; the employee or team that brings home the glory gets a financial bonus. In our own careers, the perks for personal performance have spanned the range from the usual to the unexpected: tickets to the movies, attendance at a corporate celebration with a choice of golf, tennis, or a day at a spa; a case of Taittinger champagne and a seat on a professional tour group to Asia and Australia.

And what's wrong with that? Incentive theory goes all the way back to amoebas in the lab. Poke an amoeba with something unpleasant, and it will shrink away. Put sugar nearby, and it will move toward the sweet reward. But, presumably unlike amoebas, we are thinking creatures. Incentives, however sweet, stimulate our imaginations. Am I getting as much as the amoeba next door? What's going to be required next? Will I continue to be good enough to get my reward?

While it's picking a winner, competition also identifies the losers. In short, inherent in competition are negative comparisons: I'm not as good as I should be; someone else would do it better; I could do better. Such self-criticisms drain our energy, diminishing the resources we can bring to bear on the challenges in front of us. The less good we find ourselves in comparison to others or to some perceived standard,

the more insecure we become. The greater the insecurity, the less mental energy we have available. On and on, negative comparison erodes our experience.

Just the other day, Robert's son, Remy, who is 12, was helping him rent a car at the Budget counter in the Tampa airport when he noticed the "Employee of the Month" award on the wall. He blurted out, "Hey, Dad! That's not fair! What about everyone else, didn't they do a good job too?" The agent was so touched she gave them a two-class upgrade and let Remy pick out the car.

At most companies, very little can be accomplished by just one person. Work is a collective effort, so why single out someone's conduct when a team is required to give the customer a satisfactory experience?

For example, meet Betsy's client Mary. She's stressed because she feels she isn't getting to work early enough. The mother of two children under the age of six, she manages a regional team for a national company. Often, she checks e-mails at 11 p.m. or handles conference calls at 7 in the morning. Yet if she doesn't make it into the office until 9:30 a.m., she worries that her team members will resent her.

As a matter of fact, one employee has complained. On an important project, Mary kept checking in and stayed available by pager, but an employee who stayed after hours in the office told a co-worker she was suffering while "the boss" was coasting 9-to-5. The criticism hit Mary in a vulnerable spot, worrying whether she's meeting the expectations of her team. Each day, now, she's getting a little more exhausted as she tries to juggle all the demands and to be physically present in the office not just on time, but a half-hour early.

The irony is that the worker who complained about Mary was a poor performer, and isn't even there anymore. Mary hasn't heard grumbling from anyone else on her team. Yet the debate over whether Mary is meeting expectations goes on, in her own head.

The habit of comparison becomes ingrained until we can't turn it off. A friend of ours tells of being on a beach in Hawaii at sunset, listening to the waves gently lapping at the shore, watching a dance of color across the sky until the ball of the sun dropped through stripes of clouds into the sea. At that moment, he overheard a tourist say to his wife, "I don't know, honey, I think the sunset we saw last year was more beautiful."

Equally insidious but less obviously corrosive are positive comparisons. We're taught, as managers (and as parents), to reinforce desirable behaviors with "atta-boy" feedback. But every grain of sugar poured onto our self-esteem is also a seed of doubt. Will I be better than the next guy that comes along? Will I do well enough next time? And if not, how will I live without sugar?

In other words, every incentive has two sides: immediate gratification, but eventual sabotage. Rewards make our self-image burn bright. But by tacitly reinforcing an expectation of judging and being judged, incentives leave behind a cinder of insecurity, lying in wait for the right combination of events to fan it into a raging anxiety. Check your own patterns of comparison, over a period of just one day:

- How many times do you think you do something better than others do?
- How many times do you think you do something less well than others?
- How many times do you compare your experience to something that happened before? Or to a stated or unstated expectation?

All of that thinking distracts us from what's happening in the present moment. It drains our energy, makes it harder for us to be creative, productive, effective. Comparison, in other words, is a largely overlooked perpetrator of corporate stress. The antidote is simple: curiosity.

- What thinking might have caused someone to behave in a certain way?
- What might they see that I don't see?
- Have I assumed that they knew or believed or understood something that might not have been clear?
- Have I assumed someone's reaction to me?
- How much is happening in my thoughts, as opposed to what's really going on in front of me?

Mary has begun to find hope for relief from stress by practicing curiosity. When she engages with people, she's adopting a stance of "not-being-so-sure," of noticing what she thinks or assumes about the person, and then looking again.

For example, at her office Christmas party, she spent a few minutes with a co-worker's husband, about whom she'd already formed some judgment. Her co-worker was lively, but she seemed to have married a dud: the husband had always seemed dull and withdrawn. Instead of doing a quick greeting, Mary looked again, stayed curious. Not only did she find that the husband shared her interest in hard rock, but discovered a side to him that was animated and interesting.

"I'm really enjoying this," Mary reports. "In the typical back-and-forth kind of conversation, I tend to get distracted, to be 'done' after a certain time and check out. Being consciously curious helps me to stay engaged." And isn't "engagement" what all incentives really aim for?

For more information email Partners@AccompliGroup.com