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FROM COMPETITION TO COLLABORATION: INDEPENDENCE AND POWER IN THE NEW SHARING ECONOMY

From Competition to Collaboration: Independence and Power in the New Sharing Economy

Summer 2017



I admit I have a love/hate relationship with competition. When I was in high school, I wrote my college application essay on why competition was a negative force in education. As I recall, I focused on three main arguments:

- Competition can keep us from becoming our essential selves, as in that mode, success is measured by how well we conform to an accepted standard for which we all compete.

- At its essence, competition is about being better at the expense of someone else being worse, instead of improving for one's own satisfaction.
- Competition can keep us from exploring uncharted territory as we strive to be the best at what is known.

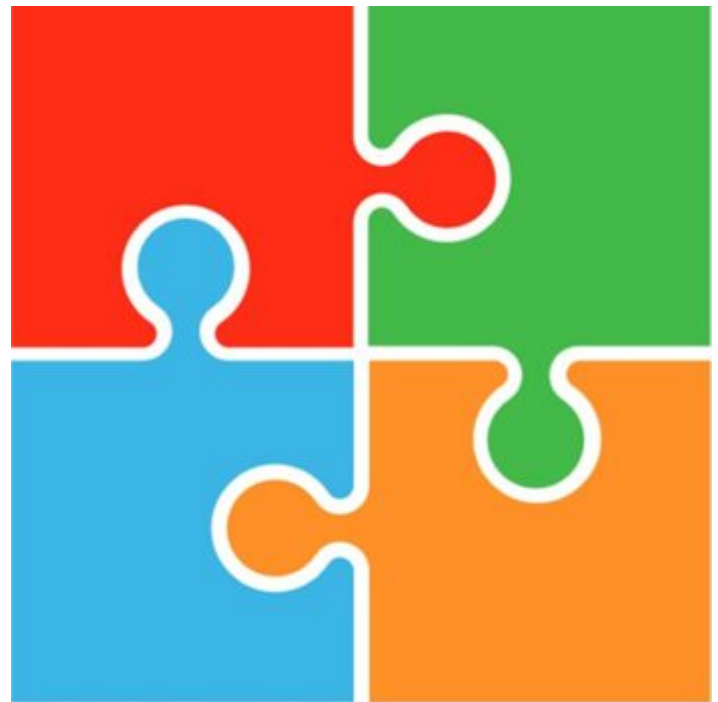
Some notable people also have commented on the dark side of competition. Alfie Kohn's book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* addresses the destructive effect of win/lose arrangements, noting that when children compete, they are less able to take the perspective of others, to see the world from someone else's point of view. In an address to the World Economic Forum in 2009, Desmond Tutu noted the negative world effects of so many societies "[worshipping] in the temple of cutthroat competition."

It turns out, however, that a majority of people in the United States think competition is a good thing. If you go to debate.org, you will find that 71 percent of the arguments support competition as a healthy and positive force, noting that competition can spur innovation and increase motivation. As an adult consumer, I began to see the positive effects of competition. Products improve when there is competition in the marketplace. Prices also tend to lower when there is increased competition.

Today, independent schools exist in a very competitive market. They compete with each other, with other types of schools, and with other ways families can spend their disposable dollars. But has that competition made our schools stronger or served students better?

No doubt there are many opinions on this, and I'm sure there are valid arguments both for and against competition in the education landscape. For example, some suggest that new experimental school models entering the landscape will improve education and provide opportunity for students in need, while others say that students who attend these schools may pay the price if the new approach does not lead to successful outcomes. Time will tell.

Two theories really resonate with me, as I think they provide a new lens on dealing with a competitive environment. The first is that of Srinivasa Rao, author of the book *Why Only Is Better Than Best*. He argues that creating unmistakable work will rule over competing to be the best at the accepted norm. To succeed in this milieu, "you must begin by throwing out the social norms and pressures that push you to follow an authoritative source or established set of standards and instead create a new way to accomplish a goal," he writes. He further suggests that we need to stop worshipping at the altar of best practices.



He continues: "Best practices are your worst enemy when it comes to innovation and creativity. Maybe in the short run the best practice will allow you to replicate the result that somebody else has produced and move you to the middle of [the] pack, but over a long enough timeline, it puts you in a race to the bottom, because your products, your services, whatever it is you're doing become monetized, become sterilized, become irrelevant, and they get washed up in a sea of sameness."

As education leaders, we need to ask ourselves: Are we caught in a race to be the best at the status quo or are we truly striving to be the best at who we uniquely are? Rao

suggests: “When nobody does what you do in the way you do it ... the competition and all the standard metrics by which you’re typically measured no longer matter, because the factors that distinguish your work are so personal that nothing or nobody can replicate it. You’re not the best at what you do, you’re the only.”

Another thought leader whose theories resonate with me is Rachel Botsman who speaks, writes, and teaches about collaboration and trust. She suggests that we are moving out of an era of competition and into one of collaborative consumption, where trust and relationships are the new currency. She defines collaborative consumption as “the reinvention of traditional market behaviors—renting, lending, swapping, sharing, bartering, gifting—through technology, taking place in ways and on a scale not possible before the internet.” In her TED Talk, “The Currency of the New Economy is Trust,” she provides the examples of Airbnb, Uber, and TaskRabbit as the kinds of businesses that thrive in this type of environment. All are designed to collaborate around a need and thrive when trusting relationships are built. She suggests that we are on a cusp of a revolution that will change everything about the way we engage businesses. In her new book, *Who Can You Trust?*, due out in October, she will examine “why trust is collapsing in all kinds of institutions and yet at the same time, the rise of new technologies is enabling ‘distributed trust’ across networks of people, organizations, and intelligent machines. Trust will shift from institutions to people.”

There also is new experimentation around the marriage of competition and collaboration to spur innovation.

A good example of this is global crowdsourcing to solve problems or identify new ways of doing things. Businesses who used to protect corporate secrets now hold open competitions to obtain new thinking about how to solve a problem. New thought is generated and individuals build on each other’s ideas to come up with truly out-of-the-box solutions. Researchers who study this new practice say it is successful because it stimulates diversity that is often hard to find within a company that may be stuck in one way of thinking.

Many forecasters, like Botsman, agree that we are moving into a new sharing economy in which pursuing the best and competing for attention in an overcrowded space may be replaced by valuing what we have and sharing to improve each other’s circumstances. “The sharing economy is growing 20 times faster than predicted,” says Benita Matofska, founder and chief sharer of the Brighton, U.K.-based social enterprise The People Who Share, in a recent interview with *Forbes*. “Our own research shows this phenomenon is growing faster than Facebook.”

The sharing economy offers some interesting models for independent schools. Take Cohealo, a technology company that helps health systems share medical equipment across facilities, so they can optimize spending, accelerate cash flow, and improve access to care. Are there opportunities for schools to share assets with each other to save money and time, and enhance access?

It may be time for our sector to move away from worrying about competition and instead think about how we might redefine our uniqueness and grow through the power of collaboration. In this new sharing economy, our independence and the power of the community will be our strengths.

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