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Competitiveness in the Workplace: Attributes and Team Benefits

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Competition starts early in life and offers important lessons in human behavior, communication, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and conflict resolution. First encounters with competitive behaviors may occur as babies, at play, when two are sitting side by side and a toy is placed in front of them—each will vie for coveting the ball for themselves. One will succeed and the other will not—usually resulting in tears. This scenario will be played out many times during childhood, adolescence, and as adults—and each time a competitive situation is encountered there are lessons to be learnt about sharing, good manners, common courtesy, cultural practices, communication, and what is or is not considered to be acceptable behavior. The lessons learnt through these experiences may inform responses to competition throughout life and in the workplace. Among the Chinese people, competitive spirit has been referred to as *kiasu* (afraid to lose) (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002), and in this paper we explore *kiasuism* behaviors, its traits and impact on the individual, team, and at workplace. Strategies for effectively harnessing competitive behaviors in the workplace are identified to support positive, harmonious, outcome-focused environments.

The benefits of competition in the workplace are widely debated (Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008). Some assert competition augments organizational outcomes and individual performance (Sauers & Bass, 1990). In the Western culture, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) asserts that people actively seek opportunities to compare themselves with others as a means of proving their competence. The theory differentiates between upward (comparing with superior individuals) and downward (comparing with inferior individuals) social comparisons. Upward comparison is more detrimental as it could result in more competitive behavior or psychological consequences such as low self-esteem and depression while downward comparison could result in a more positive behavior.

At the workplace, while working in a competitive climate can be motivational, managers and colleagues need to be mindful of the challenges competition brings between team members and the need to maintain and promote creative, respectful, staff relationships. The pressure to achieve social expectations and career accomplishment has created a highly competitive spirit among professionals. Competition in any personal endeavor is normal in every culture as it drives people to excel but can also make them overly aggressive (Bing, 1999) to the point of being hypercompetitive. Hypercompetitiveness is regarded

as a maladaptive behavior resulting in manipulation, aggressiveness, exploitation, and derogatory behaviors toward others (Ryckman, Libby, van den Borne, Gold, & Lindner, 1997).

Within multicultural workplaces *kiasuism* may be part of a shared cultural identity (Ellis, 2014) and regarded not as a maladaptive behavior although people can also be hypercompetitive. The difference is that it is not a neurotic personality attribute but a set of conscious behaviors designed to achieve desired goals (Ho, Ang, Loh, & Ng, 1998). Although it has been viewed as an endearing trait, there are positive and negative sides to *kiasu*: (*kiasu-positive*)—diligence and hard work to stay on top of a situation (Chua, 1989) and (*kiasu-negative*)—personal envy and selfish behavior to win at all costs whether in education or a career (Kagda, 1993). *Kiasu* attitudes and behaviors are mostly studied among students who want to excel in school. Kirby and Ross (2007) conducted a study of the overall *kiasu* tendency and its impact on academic performance among 326 undergraduate students from a large southwestern university. They found that *kiasu-positive* behaviors led to improved school performance from hard work and diligence and *kiasu-negative* behaviors gave the impression of untrustworthiness among peers. Chua (1989) stated that *kiasuism* is not all bad as Kirby, Kirby, Bell, and Schafer (2010) noted that obtaining competitive edge through *kiasuism* lies in selecting and implementing the right tactics for every situation students face. In addition, Hwang (2003) found that adopting a *kiasu-positive* attitude led to improved teamwork and *kiasu-negative* resulted in task participation and social support even in highly collective and competitive environments.

Kiasuism is characterized by five phenomena: “the fear of losing out, selfishness, being calculating, greed,” and “risk-aversiveness” (Ho et al., 1998, p. 367). Bearing these traits in mind, research also suggests that competitive, cutthroat environments may heighten the tendency for workers to be more self-centered and less empathetic toward one another. Workplaces characterized by an inclusive, and democratic, culture on the other hand are more likely to demonstrate altruistic behaviors (Music, 2012). Competitive workplaces are a reality of modern life. The university setting is a known example of a highly competitive workplace environment (Cleary, Usher, & Jackson, 2015; Cleary, Walter, Halcomb, & Lopez, 2016). In embracing a *kiasu* attitude, universities are becoming more and more competitive so as to be ranked higher than other universities.

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