

Winning and losing

Following the success of last month's TJ Awards ceremony, Clare Forrest explores the pros and cons of competition

Back in the late 1960s, a family moved to Cheshire from St Albans. One of the two girls in the family, while very pleasantly surprised at the lack of whippets and flat caps and 'dark satanic mills', found the subsequent change in school both unsettling and difficult. She was sent to a small public girls' school where it was assumed there would 'nice' people; she was actually teased unmercifully – some would say bullied – for (amongst other things) her Southern accent. While she never really settled at the school, she did do well there and was frequently at, or near, the top of the class in most subjects.

As with most schools of that time, there was an annual prize-giving ceremony, held with great pomp in the school hall to which a 'great and good' speaker was always invited. The school was very much of the belief that competition was a good thing, raising both motivation and performance, and the prize giving formed an important part of this competitive outlook.

One year after joining the school, at the annual prize giving ceremony, the girl, to the great delight of her parents, won a prize. Was she pleased? Were her classmates pleased for her? Did the prize help her to do better in the school? Did it, in other words, motivate her?

To find the answers to these questions we need to consider what research tells us about competition, reward and self-esteem.

There is a simple belief that most people have about competition – it's a good thing to do. And, of course, it usually is – for the winner. But does it have any real, long lasting effects? And, if it does, are these always positive?

Competition, most social anthropologists and biologists will tell you, forms the cornerstone of the human psyche. It originates internally from that most fundamental of drivers, survival. If I compete – and win – against you, my survival is assured. If I don't compete, I can never feel safe. If I lose then – ultimately – I die. Of course, these days, for most of us, our basic survival is pretty much assured but our competitive instinct still remains deep rooted. It explains the popularity of games, gaming and the large variety of TV game shows. As human beings we instinctively understand competition and we want the thrill of winning – even if it's only vicariously through voting for our favourite contestant in shows such as Big Brother or through the achievements of our kids.

So competition is a good thing because winning makes us feel good. Right? And feeling good is the key to a strong sense of self-esteem. Right? And since, as we all now 'know', it's that low sense of self-esteem that lies at the heart of many of society's ills, the cure is obvious – raise self-esteem and help to 'cure' society and raise achievement at every level. It's a simple equation and, as such, attractive. It

is what has led to the doctrine that 'we are all winners now' and the heaping on of positive praise at all times – even when it's not deserved.

Unfortunately, it seems that it's just not true. While it feels great to feel positive about yourself, self-esteem doesn't in any way correlate to your motivation to learn and, hence, to your achievements. According to one review of the literature, more than 10,000 published studies have failed to prove any correlation – and it seems that most of those who undertook the studies were extremely anxious to find one.

Susan Harter's summary of the same research concluded that working to raise children's self-esteem to encourage them to perform better in school was not just ineffective – it actually had the reverse result. In other words, to put it crudely, the more the child was told its performance was great, the less he or she worked to do better. Even more worryingly, there is evidence that kids who, when they are told they are intelligent, will simply refuse to do things that they think they won't be great at – because they only want to feel good and don't want to put in the effort to learn something at which they think they will fail.

And if that wasn't enough bad news, how about this: it appears that self-esteem isn't all it's cracked up to be in other ways, apart from in learning. In psychological studies, bullies and many criminals were found to be those subjects with the greatest self-esteem. Counter-intui-

tively, it seems that many of those who instigate aggression and the horrors of such massacres such as that at Columbine, do so because of an unrealistically positive self-appraisal.

It's not that self-esteem *per se* is necessarily a bad thing, it's more about where it comes from and whether it is therefore healthy or unhealthy. Providing praise as a reward to build up self-esteem is worse than useless if it is given unconditionally and unrelated to reality or – perhaps even worse – through using false comparisons. On the latter point, consider the eighth grade students in 14 countries who outperformed US students in maths and those students in eight countries who outperformed the US students in science. In both cases, Korean students were in the top three. Yet, according to the 2005 annual Brown Center report on education, only 6 per cent of the Korean students surveyed had confidence in their maths skills, compared with 39 per cent of US eighth-graders.

At its worst, unhealthy self-esteem can, and does, create monsters. At best, it seems to create a pleasant self-delusion, which can lead to a massive and unpleasant reality check when the truth hits. If you've ever watched the X Factor auditions, you will have seen this many times as the truly awful singer, who has been consistently and regularly told by her family that she has a wonderful voice and who believes this unconditionally, suddenly discovers that it just isn't true. It's not enough just to be positive about your achievement – it has to be a true achievement for that positivity to be healthy.

Healthy self-esteem comes from genuine achievement; it's not the other way round. Purposeful activity, making a contribution – these are the things which create healthy self-esteem. But that genuine achievement also has to be valued by its owner if it is to create healthy self-esteem. In other words, it's no



self-esteem *noun* one's good opinion of oneself; self-respect

win *verb* (won, winning) 1 tr & intr to be victorious or come first in (a contest, race or bet, etc). 2 tr & intr to beat an opponent or rivals in (a competition, war, conflict or election, etc

lose *verb* (lost, losing) to fail to keep or obtain something, especially because of a mistake, carelessness, etc

use my being a great cleaner/mother/singer if I don't value being these things. And my values come from what I see, feel and hear from others whom I value – parents, friends, colleagues. So to obtain genuine healthy self-esteem, we need to be in an environment where

- the things we genuinely achieve are praised, and
- these are also the things we see that are valued consistently.

There must, in all cases, be congruency. We must not be praised for work that is badly done or be praised as a soothing ointment when things go wrong for us. This devalues the praise, so when it is given for genuine achievement it has become meaningless – and therefore worthless.

Back now to the relationship between competition, reward and self-esteem. Winning really can make you feel good. But it can also stop you achieving more if you feel the competition was low, or if the reward didn't meet the effort you put in or if you didn't value the task that brought you the prize.

Remember the story that began this article – our prize-winning school student? That student was me, and that 'prize' nearly destroyed me. Reading was not valued by my fellow school students generally and the 'prize' I won could not thus have been worse. It was created especially for me – I'm sure with nothing but good intentions but extraordinarily bad judgement – to recognise my reading skills and called – my toes still curl – The Bookworm Prize. Was I motivated? Not at all. I knew I was a good reader – it was one of my few pleasures at that time as it provided an escape from the endless torment I suffered at that school. Now my only pleasure had further singled me out and created further misery. My reward – of course it had to be a book – was actually a punishment.

So it's great to know that for all our TJ Award winners their award will be genuinely meaningful, motivating and spur them on to even greater achievements. Why? Because this event has been judged by acknowledged industry experts for achievements that the entrants must have valued, because they had to choose to enter the competition in the first place.

But our losers too will be motivated. How do I know this? Because I'm sure that not one of our entrants will have set out to achieve an award. Rather, each one will have aimed to achieve something infinitely more rewarding – the development of others. And the fact that they are entrants shows that they have been successful. It's that success, in and of itself, that will have been their real reward and will spur them on to even greater achievements. And that's fantastic news for our learners. ■

Clare Forrest is a co-founder of Structured Learning, a training consultancy that has been providing business and management training since 1983. She can be contacted through her website at www.structuredlearning.com