

Excerpted from

Collaborative Competition: A Women's Guide to Succeeding by Competing

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THE COMPETITIVE WORKPLACE

The world we live in is becoming increasingly competitive. As women, how can we be ourselves, be competitive, achieve our goals, and most importantly enjoy our work and life?

As business news from the *New York Times* to local papers is dominated by women opting out of the corporate world, we have to ask ourselves why they are leaving. Brenda Barnes, the former CEO of PepsiCo, gave up her megawatt career to spend more time with her three children; Karen Hughes resigned from her big job in the Bush White House to go home to Texas; and Lisa Beattie Frelinghuysen, featured on *60 Minutes*, was building a highly successful career as a lawyer but quit after she had her first baby.

Having worked in very tough, competitive industries that demand 60 to 100 hour work weeks, I think some women left to have families, but many more left because they didn't enjoy the work or didn't feel that the workplace was hospitable. They didn't feel encouraged or fully challenged, and the family issue is partly an excuse. Often, women don't get the good clients and assignments in these industries because although blatant discrimination has decreased, more subtle forms of bias persist.

There are two sides to discrimination. The company's side includes policies, procedures, and the processes by which people are managed and treated. The individual side is how we manage ourselves and our work environment. My focus in this book is on the individual.

In my experience, women often leave the corporate world because they struggle with how to thrive in male-dominated and/or highly competitive environments. I don't think you can change the professional atmosphere overnight, but I do think all women can modify their views of competition, learn to enjoy the work environment, and succeed.

Most women struggle to find a positive view of competition. When you think of competition and women, what comes to mind?

Most people say things like women work hard but they:

- are catty
- are excessively competitive with other women
- don't help other women advance
- can't seem to get it right: either too bitchy or too passive
- struggle with how to relax and have fun at work
- won't take risks
- aim for perfection every time

- are not competitive because they want to be seen as feminine and desirable to men

What do you notice about all of these views? They are all negative.

There are many books written about the psychology of women and perfectionism, women as athletes, woman in competition with each other. But what about a book telling women how to learn to love competition in the workplace?

My personal and professional experience has shown me that competition in any environment can be like the Olympics—fun, challenging, collaborative, and an absolute thrill! It is an opportunity and an inspiration to go beyond ourselves and accomplish demanding objectives. That is the goal of this book: to teach women how to leverage their strengths to enjoy competition at work and inspire them to reach their goals. This book's approach helps you to enjoy competition in life too.

Do women even want leadership roles in companies? According to Catalyst, the leading not-for-profit organization that does research on women in business, 55% of women and 57% of men aspire to the most senior leadership role. My research and experience supports this. Women do want to achieve and make a difference. The goal may not always be the senior job, but most women are very competitive with themselves and want to do their best.

However, despite the fact that the majority of women want these leadership roles, statistics show that they are unlikely to achieve them. What is the difference between men and women in how they approach getting the job?

To succeed in work—and life in general—women must realize that becoming an effective competitor is essential to becoming an effective leader.

HOW THIS BOOK BEGAN

After a particularly bad day of meetings with my hyper-competitive, perfectionist female boss, I took the day off and wrote an outline for this book. I was surprised by the ease with which my ideas flowed. However, these ideas were no accident. They were the result of a seminar led by Carole Hyatt, *Getting to Next*—a two-day career exploration program for women, which I had attended three months earlier. My group included about 25 fascinating, bright, and well-educated women who were trying to figure out their next career moves. During the seminar, we went through many self-exploration and small-group exercises, constantly getting feedback and ideas from other members of the group. Women kept telling me that I seemed passionate about women and competition and should do something on that topic. I thought *hmmm, maybe this could be my next move*. After all, having been a top-ranked amateur tennis player for 25 years and having worked on Wall Street for a decade, I had years and years of experience with extreme, high-level competition. I left the seminar fired up with energy and ideas about creating a consulting business concerning women and competition.

As the ideas continued to germinate, voilà—they led to the creation of this book and a successful business that provides strategic leadership consulting, training, and coaching to women and men on how to enjoy Collaborative Competition™ and thrive in a challenging and competitive work environment. My business specializes in helping companies develop their emerging professionals (first five years of work) and high-potential leaders (five to ten years of experience) through the Collaborative Competi-

tive™ mindset and skills. Examples range from coaching a woman leader in a large pharmaceutical firm who wants to get promoted, to teaching strategic influence skills to women banking officers, to partnering with an investment bank to design a strategy for attracting and retaining more women, to conducting *Take Charge of Your Career* programs for entry-level and lateral hires in a new media company. My clients have included Credit Suisse and UBS investment banking, UEM Media, Symbol Technology, Bank of America, NYU and Smith College Executive Education, Price Waterhouse Coopers, Henry Schein, and Glaxo Smith Kline.

MY RESEARCH

When I discussed my ideas with a close friend, she said, “Why not interview women in New York, California, and Florida, the way Gail Sheehy did for her book, *Passages?*” I thought that was a great suggestion, since I wanted to appeal to women across the country and in varied professions. These interviews add credibility and real data, making this book broader than just my views, by providing other women’s real-world experiences.

I interviewed about 40 women throughout the United States and Canada who have successfully risen to the top in competitive industries including: medicine, sales, consulting, politics, professional sports, investment banking, entrepreneurs, fundraising, and law. I developed both open- and closed-ended questionnaires to determine how key motivational skills and psychological qualities affected their success. This book includes their stories and the case histories of my clients, all of whom will be referred to by false names. In contrast, people who are mentioned from the news or other sources will be referred to by their real names.

WHY AM I PASSIONATE ABOUT COMPETITION?

“Do one thing and do it well,” was my mother’s motto. My father was a world-renowned neurologist and my mother was a homemaker with five children, so they both provided me with strong role models for success. When I was a little girl, my mother enrolled me in various activities searching for the one at which I could excel. Since I was a tall and skinny girl—5’8” when I was only ten years old—my height and the clumsiness that came with it made the common sports for girls at that time challenging. In ballet my biggest talent was skipping backwards, and in gymnastics the other girls complained of the number of spotters needed for my legs alone.

One day I wandered up to the neighborhood tennis courts and fell in love: finally a place where being tall was an asset. My mother said, “We will pay for tennis lessons every week, but you will have to play in tournaments and take tennis seriously if we are going to make this investment. We don’t care if you win or lose. We just want you to demonstrate dedication to one thing, because the only way you will be able to enjoy something is if you become highly skilled at it.”

Since I was only ten years old, I didn’t understand what my mother meant. I thoroughly enjoyed playing tennis against everyone and anyone for the first few years, and I won most of the local tournaments until I was thirteen years old.

Then something changed. I became very aware of whom I was playing, and it mattered if I won or lost. I didn’t understand what had happened. My girlfriends and I suddenly felt uncomfortable playing against each other. We stopped keeping track of the score, and we started playing more doubles. Tennis went from a game in which I enjoyed the challenge to one of perfectionism

and identity: my identity became synonymous with every win and loss.

My world went from one of endless possibilities and competitors and challenges to one in which I needed to play only against people whom I could beat or to whom my self-image could stand losing. My self-talk went from, “I can’t wait to play Jill and see how my new forehand works,” to, “I dread having to play Sue. If I lose I will hate myself and feel like I am a really bad player.”

It was the 70s, an exciting but confusing time for women. I mostly had male coaches. Those coaches told us to go and kill and win, while our mothers and the media wanted women to be pretty, nice, and ladylike. I felt conflicting desires: to win and be an excellent tennis player, but to fit in and be well-liked by both boys and girls. This conflict left me with fewer options than my male counterparts had. Tennis taught me that women have a smaller range of acceptable choices, and we have to learn how to work that small space even more efficiently than our male counterparts.

References

Sheehy, Gail. *Passages: Predictable Crisis of Adult Life*. (New York: Bantam, 1977).

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, September 1993).

WHY CAN’T WOMEN ENJOY COMPETITION?

When I turned ten in 1970, Title IX was just about to become law, so I was part of the first generation of American women to play competitive sports en masse. However, we were primarily limited to individual sports: tennis, gymnastics, swimming, diving, golf, ballet, track and field, skiing, and figure skating. The goal of most of these sports is to get the “perfect 10,” to swim or run the perfect race, making no mistakes.

Winning was seen as synonymous with not making any mistakes. This striving for perfection was a way of life for most women athletes. In addition, parents and coaches provided pressure to make sure that we would perform perfectly. Today, nearly forty years later, women commonly go out for team sports such as soccer, football, basketball, ice hockey, and baseball. However, surprisingly, young women in the workplace today, in their mid-to-late twenties and early thirties, while more comfortable with team sports and winning than women of my generation, still suffer from the female challenge of wanting to be liked, and many still want to be “perfect.”

Also, since most girls grow up playing sports against other girls, rather than against boys, women often find competing in the professional world to be unexpectedly challenging. There are few opportunities for girls and boys to learn how to compete directly against each other and with each other. Yet the work environment is co-ed, requiring women to be comfortable competing against both men and women.

Deborah Tannen’s Research On Gender And Communication

Deborah Tannen, a psychologist and linguist who has written several books, including *You Just Don’t Understand*, says, “Women

tend to approach the world as an individual in a network of connections.” In numerous studies of how children play, Tannen says, “The chief commodity that is bartered in the boys’ hierarchical world is status, and the way to achieve and maintain status is give orders and get others to follow them. The chief commodity that is bartered in the girls’ community is intimacy. Girls monitor their friendships for subtle shifts in alliances. Girls learn that displaying superiority will not get them what they want—affiliation with their peers. For this they have to appear the same as, not better than, their peers.”

This means that if women strive to be smarter, more successful, or somehow better than their peers, they risk being shunned by their female friends or colleagues; this outlook makes competition seem to be a threatening and dangerous activity for women. Furthermore, most women view competition as a solo activity, whereas for men it is more of a team effort. As a result of these worldviews, women don’t assume that they will have support for lofty goals or ambitions; in fact, they assume they probably will have to go it alone. Research supports this expectation: women tend to be more isolated as they advance in the ranks of the business or professional worlds. So as Deborah Tannen predicted based on social behavior among girls, if you want to rise above your peers, other women may shun you or try to bring you down.

This combination is challenging for women: a natural tendency towards affiliation and a perfectionist’s competitiveness to be the perfect woman, combined with a desire to blend in (or not stand out) so as to be liked by women and to be attractive to men. Also, it is often unclear to women what the goal of being “good” or “well-liked” actually means.

THE GOAL OF COMPETITION

For men the goal of competition is clear: winning. But for women, whose goals include trying to be good or well-liked, there is no end. We can never be good enough. In the play *The Good Body*, Eve Ensler (author of “The Vagina Monologues”) talks about her desire to have the perfect body and to be a good girl. The problem is that your body can never be perfect. This view, that you can never be perfect, is a hindrance if it becomes a woman’s identity, because there is no clear end. It forces women to strive constantly to be perfect, or at least better or well-liked, rather than just focus on one or two things to change or improve.

The challenge for women is that we tend to be perfectionists more often than men. Why? Women have been socialized to play individual sports, to do well in school, and to please and be nice to others.

A *perfectionist*, according to the dictionary is “A person who will not accept or be content with anything less than perfect.” According to psychologists, perfectionism stems from a childhood that had an overemphasis on performance. Focusing on performance in one thing—such as a sport, music, or schoolwork—is fine for a child. However, if this focus on accomplishment becomes an end in itself, and if performance determines your identity, the continued focus leads to perfectionism.

Perfectionists are constantly looking for affirmation of the self, based on performance. A perfectionist *is* her latest win or loss or musical performance. She confuses who she is with what she does. As a result, she feels dissatisfied with herself and with life. This leads to beliefs and behaviors such as:

- Being judgmental of others who appear less than perfect
- Avoiding taking risks

- Procrastinating
- Feeling of entitlement (why should I have to wait?)
- Needing to be in control, i.e. be involved in every step
- Believing that anything less than perfect is mediocrity
- Trying to do everything oneself, not able to say “no” and/or delegate
- Being unable to see the big picture, being stuck in the details
- Not enjoying the latest victory because of concerns that you may not be able to live up to it
- Hesitating because you do not trust yourself
- Only trying something new when absolutely sure of success

Women tend to view perfection as an identity, which limits their ability to perform as effective competitors, take on leadership roles, and most importantly enjoy life and its challenges.

When A Perfectionist Competes

There is an older man, Joe, with whom I play tennis from time to time. He is a rather annoying man to play against because I feel that I am the better player, but he is tough to beat. When he plays me, he deliberately hits balls with a lot of slice and spin on them, causing them to stay low to the ground. He knows that because I am tall, these shots will be difficult for me. I get pissed off at him. I think, how dare he hit a lot of junk balls? Doesn't he realize that I am the better player and that he should respect that and play by the rules? Why can't he just follow along and hit balls hard and deep like most good players? But one day I realized: this is what competition is all about. Competition is about seeking challenges in order to improve your own performance.

I also realized that Joe was employing one of the rules of competition: analyzing his opponent's weaknesses and exploiting them (i.e., hitting low balls to someone who is tall). This example teaches an important lesson about why perfectionists do not make good competitors. We take problems like Joe's shots as personal attacks and get upset, instead of viewing those problems as challenges that could make us play better. Psychologically, I felt like Jennifer Capriati, putting pressure on myself to win. It is hard to relax and play well when your self-talk is saying, “Win or else,” or “You should be beating this guy.” Once I let go of my annoyance, I started enjoying the challenge. I'd think, “Let's see what I can do.”

Much to my amazement I hit some very deep shots that were tough for Joe to return. His annoying style actually made me a better player. I had to change my *Collaborative Competition™* style, be ready for drop shots, learn to play the low-angled shots, and be aggressive and patient at the same time. And it worked!

Striving for perfection can be a source of positive energy, a motive to work hard to achieve excellence. Some women whom I in-

interviewed defined perfectionism as “doing the best of your ability or having to be different or out of the box.” These women were motivated by their perfectionism to perform well, and they enjoyed the process. Other women whom I interviewed thought of perfectionism as, “fear of failure, control freak, or obsessed with everything being just right.” They tended not to enjoy the process and focused on avoiding losses. The following chart summarizes the range of responses by which women defined perfectionism.

Definitions of Perfectionism (see page 6 in book)

Positive

Hitting 100% of outcome
In context of striving for excellence
Drive
Think out of the box
Want everything to be right
Doing it to the best of your ability
Don't dwell on unnecessary details
High quality performance

Negative

Fear of failure
Often go over the top or are obsessively concerned with everything being “right”
Viewed self as insecure
Rigid, over structured
Everything depends on you doing it right
Control freak
All the details have to be perfect 100% of the time

As an end in and of itself, winning makes a perfectionist too critical and even too timid. Competition becomes a matter of reducing or avoiding errors. As a result, being less than perfect means that your identity becomes spoiled. You are perfect, or you are a loser.

This rigid view is counter to the flexibility required for success in today's world. The world we live in is constantly changing and requires the ability to observe, analyze, and adjust. What made you successful yesterday may not work today. For example, one of the women I interviewed was valued primarily as a subject-matter expert, but her continued success depended on the ability to build and maintain a large network of people. Unfortunately, she was unable to move from being a technical expert to becoming a relationship builder and was eventually let go from her job. This woman was unable to observe and react to the changing environment fast enough because she was too busy striving to be perfect as a technical expert.

Counterproductive Perfectionism On The Job

Striving for perfection as part of your identity doesn't necessarily lead to high performance or excellence. On the contrary, perfectionism can lead to the feeling of never being satisfied with your performance: it can inhibit your ability to take smart risks, or to observe the world around you and adapt.

Research shows that even though more women now participate in team sports, they often don't transfer these lessons or skills to competition in the real world, including the working world, where there is no a clear path to excellent performance.

Jennifer the Analyst – An Example

I was asked to coach Jennifer, one of those rare financial analysts who joined a large investment bank right out of college and was promoted to Associate three years later. However, despite years of being ranked at the top of her peers, she was in danger of being fired for poor performance. My goal as her coach was to help her move from being a successful Associate to becoming a new Vice President. This is one of the toughest challenges in investment banking: moving from a job focused on getting the numbers right to one focused on building relationships with clients, bringing in new business, and managing and leading others.

Jennifer was soft spoken, smart, introverted, curious, sensitive, and hardworking. When I asked her to describe the differences between herself and her more successful male colleagues, she said that they were better presenters, more able to schmooze with senior people and clients. Unlike her, they spent no time on internal activities, such as leading the training of junior professionals or planning social gatherings. She, on the other hand, felt uncomfortable speaking in front of large groups or socializing informally. Jennifer prided herself on her analytic skills, detail orientation, and flawless execution. It never occurred to her that she would receive less money because of her continued focus on the things that had served her so well.

What happened to Jennifer? My hypothesis was that she didn't see the value in picking her head up and looking for ways to engage in and learn from her competitors, i.e. peers. She had been receiving "10s" all along and assumed that the rules were still the same, so she never saw a reason to change.

Success in business usually comes from three things:

- Taking smart risks and being creative.
- Outdoing the competition.
- Having a wide network of supporters (including a mentor or sponsor).

At every stage it is important to be aware of "the rules of the game," since they change depending on your level within the organization. Yes, there are performance standards and annual performance and salary reviews, but from my experience in large companies, there is no exact science to predict why some people get higher ratings and more pay or promotions than others.

In fact, for career success, according to Catalyst, the leading not-for-profit organization that conducts research on women in business, having a relationship with a mentor or sponsor who supports you and promotes you is more important than hard work.

These keys to success put women at a disadvantage because:

- We tend not to be as skilled at or comfortable with taking risks;
- We usually rate ourselves more harshly than men do (that "perfectionist" tendency, making it hard to outdo the competition); and
- It is difficult for us to strategically seek out relationships with key people who can advance our careers.

Jennifer deserved better reviews on the job, but she suffered from not having a strong and supportive boss (or a mentor who

could lobby on her behalf), and she was not comfortable promoting herself. She assumed that her excellent work would sell itself. As a result, Jennifer was rated below the majority of her peers and probably would not have been promoted.

Jennifer was typical of many women who graduate from college at the top of their class and are ambitious. They tend to perform notably well for the first three to five years; then their performance falls, and with many, as in Jennifer's case, the drop is significant. These women tend to view success as they did in school, where they thrived: if they work hard and do excellent work, they will get A's—or the equivalent, positive on-the-job reviews. Many women don't seem to understand that the rules for success have changed, and that to get A's in this new business world, they are going to have to take some smart risks. They have to accept that they may not always perform perfectly. There are big learning curves in new jobs and careers, and success requires both trial and error and good mentoring and sponsorship. Most importantly, women need to develop the attitude that competition is a collaborative process and is crucial if you desire to take on a management or leadership role. In fact, taking smart risks becomes more important than striving for perfection as you move from being an individual contributor to a manager and leader.