

Healthy rivalry could boost sport and business performance, study finds

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The study assessed blindfolded participants throwing darts.

New research shows that people can recover from poor performance when rivals comment on their failures. The research, to be published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, shows that while criticism from team members sends individuals into downward performance spirals, external criticism can be a trigger that boosts performance as people try to prove the outsiders wrong.

The research carried out by the University of Exeter, Amherst College and the University of Stirling offers a method of improving performance following setbacks and can be applied both in the workplace and in sport to avoid poor performance snowballing out of control.

Lead author Dr Tim Rees of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Exeter said: "Careful management of performance following failure is

of key importance in a range of areas such as sport and business. The study shows that simple, low cost, measures that exploit the effects of intergroup dynamics can reverse downward performance spirals by encouraging a 'them and us' mentality."

During the study blindfolded participants threw darts at a dartboard and then received poor performance feedback either from a university-affiliated researcher or from an external researcher from a rival university. Participants who received this feedback from a university-affiliated researcher seemed to believe it and enact it: if it was discouraging, they failed at the next attempt, but if it was encouraging, they improved. Receiving encouragement from a member of an external team following poor performance did not help individuals improve at their next attempt. Yet those who received the poor performance feedback from an outsider were motivated to recover from the poor performance in an attempt to prove them wrong.

"Downward performance spirals can be readily observed in every domain of human performance," said co-author Jessica Salvatore of Amherst College. "Our research shows that the 'us-versus-them' mindset isn't always a destructive force – sometimes it can be the key to re-motivating yourself and turning your performance around."

Co-author Pete Coffee from the University of Stirling said: "The research not only highlights ways to improve performance but also demonstrates the positive and negative impact that encouragement and criticism from fellow group members can have. This work points to the need for people like sports coaches and business leaders to think carefully about the way they deliver performance-related feedback."

Provided by University of Exeter

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