

Want to kill creativity of women in teams? Fire up the competition

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(Phys.org) —Recent research has suggested that women play better with others in small working groups, and that adding women to a group is a surefire way to boost team collaboration and creativity.

But a new study from Washington University in St. Louis finds that this is only true when women work on [teams](#) that aren't competing against each other. Force teams to go head to head and the benefits of a female approach evaporate.

"Intergroup competition is a double-edged sword that ultimately

provides an advantage to groups and units composed predominantly or exclusively of men, while hurting the creativity of groups composed of women," said Markus Baer, PhD, lead author of the study and associate professor of organizational behavior at Olin Business School.

The study suggests that men benefit creatively from going head-to-head with other groups, while groups of women operate better in less competitive situations. As intergroup competition heats up, men become more creative and women less so.

"Women contributed less and less to the team's creative output when the competition between teams became cutthroat, and this fall-off was most pronounced in teams composed entirely of women," Baer said.

The findings are counterintuitive because previous research has shown that women generally are more collaborative than men when working in teams.

"If teams work side by side, women tend to perform better and even outperform men – they're more creative," Baer said.

"As soon as you add the element of competition though, the picture changes. Men under those circumstances gel together. They become more interdependent and more collaborative, and women just do the opposite.

"So, what is true for non-competitive circumstances, flips when it gets competitive," he said.

The study should serve as a caution to managers attempting to use competition among teams to spur creativity. It shows that intense competition can erase the creative advantage that women tend to enjoy over their male counterparts.

The simple lesson, Baer said, is that competition should not be used in all situations to stimulate creativity. It's not going to help women and probably hurts their creativity, so managers should look for different methods of motivation.

"Given that women represent a growing portion of the workforce, using competition as a means to enhance the [creativity](#) of groups, regardless of how they are composed, implies that the creative potential available to businesses is seldom fully realized," the study contends.

Baer emphasizes that nothing in his study suggests women are inherently bad at competition. Rather, it shows that gender stereotypes continue to influence behavior in the workplace.

"It's not that women stink at competing, it's that the way society views [women](#) and the way we view [competition](#), gender specific, has an impact and that impact is observable in the lab as well as in the field," Baer said. "It changes behaviors and outcomes."

Published in the May-June issue of the journal *Organization Science*, the study is titled "Intergroup Competition as a Double-Edged Sword: How Sex Composition Regulates the Effects of Competition on Group Creativity."

Findings are based on an experiment involving male and female college students working together in groups, as well as data gathered in the field from 50 teams of scientists, engineers and technicians at a global oil and gas company.

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Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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