

What do your co-workers really think of you?

February 22 2017



New research from Washington University in St. Louis shows while we know who likes us, we might not have a clue who's trying to edge us out on the job. Credit: Washington University in St. Louis

Everyday in the workplace, colleagues actively compete for a limited amount of perks, including raises, promotions, bonuses and recognition. But new research from Washington University in St. Louis shows that,

more than often than not, people fall short in determining which co-workers might be trying to edge them out on the job.

"We looked at whether [people](#) understood what other people in the workplace thought of them," said Hillary Anger Elfenbein, professor of [organizational behavior](#). "You tend to know who likes you. But, for [negative feelings](#), including competitiveness, people had no clue."

Elfenbein and her co-authors, Noah Eisenkraft from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Shirli Kopelman from the University of Michigan, ran two different studies during the course of their research, recently published in the journal *Psychological Science*. In the first, they surveyed salespeople at a Midwestern [car dealership](#) where competition was both normal and encouraged. The second study included surveys from more than 200 undergraduate students in 56 separate project groups. All were asked similar questions about their co-workers, and what they assumed those people thought of them. When the responses about competition were analyzed, the results were striking: While there were outliers, they completely canceled out.

In other words, co-workers have no clue about their competitive cohorts.

"Some people show their competitiveness, some people you can tell have it out for you, but others have it out for you and act like they're your close friend," Elfenbein said. "Those two effects wash out, and people on average have zero idea about who feels competitively toward them."

The researchers offer two main reasons for the disconnect: First, people tend to mask outward feelings of competitiveness toward others in an effort to be polite. Also, the concept of reciprocity played a role.

"For liking, reciprocation is a good thing," Elfenbein said. "You keep dates, you give gifts, you have shared, positive experiences. But to get

the benefits of competition, such as promotions or perks, you don't need it to be reciprocated. And when you don't get that feeling back, it's hard to gauge who's truly competing against you."

For a manager in the workplace who wants a strong and cohesive team, transparency and uncrossable lines appear to be the key in maintaining the balance, the researchers said.

"You want to promote a climate where there is friendly competition," Elfenbein said. "At the car dealership, everybody knows they are competing against each other. Entire salaries can be based on performance. But if you create a climate where there are boundaries you don't cross, you can make space for mutual healthy competition to be rewarded."

As for the individual in the workplace who fears being blindsided by [co-workers](#)?

"You need to pay more attention to what people do rather than what they say," Elfenbein said. "When people are too polite to say something to your face, you need a good, strong network that will let you know what other people really think."

More information: Noah Eisenkraft et al, We Know Who Likes Us, but Not Who Competes Against Us, *Psychological Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797616679440](#)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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