

Surviving the Gauntlet: Navigating the hypercompetitive work culture

Aida Rezaei ¹ and Barani Karikalan ^{2,*}

¹ Department of Early Clinical Exposure & Personal and Professional Development, Faculty of Medicine, Mahsa University, Saujana Putra, Selangor, Malaysia.

² Department of Pathology, Faculty of Medicine, Mahsa University, Saujana Putra, Selangor, Malaysia.

International Journal of Life Science Research Archive, 2023, 05(01), 001–008

Publication history: Received on 20 May 2023; revised on 29 June 2023; accepted on 01 July 2023

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53771/ijlsra.2023.5.1.0068>

Abstract

In organizations, a hypercompetitive work environment can have significant impacts on both individuals and the overall organizational culture. Constant pressure and high expectations can lead to employee dissatisfaction and turnover, resulting in a loss of talent and knowledge. A hypercompetitive environment may discourage collaboration and teamwork as individuals focus primarily on individual success rather than collective goals. When individuals are solely focused on outperforming each other, they may be less inclined to share ideas and collaborate, hindering creativity and innovation within the organization. Hypercompetition can lead to disengagement and a lack of commitment among employees, as they may feel overwhelmed, undervalued, or constantly threatened by their colleagues. Excessive competition can foster a toxic work culture characterized by cutthroat behavior, lack of trust, and limited support among team members. Strategies to deal with a hypercompetitive work environment in organizations includes fostering a collaborative work culture, encouraging open communication, managing a good work-life balance, engaging in healthy competition, managing stress and engaging in well-being activities. Addressing a hypercompetitive work environment requires a holistic approach involving leadership, organizational policies, and individual efforts. By fostering a collaborative culture and prioritizing employee well-being, organizations can create a healthier and more productive work environment.

Keywords: Organization; Competition; Expectation; Stress; Pressure; Employee

1. Introduction

A hyper-competitive work environment is characterized by intense rivalry, pressure, and a strong focus on performance and outcomes [1]. In such an environment, employees often face high expectations and fierce competition with their colleagues. The primary goal is to outperform others and achieve success, whether it's measured in terms of sales targets, promotions, or other performance metrics [2].

1.1. Key features of a hyper-competitive work environment may include

1.1.1 Intense pressure

Employees often experience high levels of pressure to perform exceptionally well. The pressure may come from management, peers, or even self-imposed expectations [3].

1.1.2 Cut-throat competition

There is a constant sense of competition among employees, with everyone vying for limited resources, promotions, or recognition [4]. Individuals may be pitted against each other to achieve the desired outcomes.

* Corresponding author: Barani Karikalan

1.1.3 Long working hours

The expectation to work long hours is common in hyper-competitive environments [5]. Employees may feel the need to put in extra hours to demonstrate dedication and surpass their peers.

1.1.4 High performance expectations

The focus is on achieving exceptional results. Employees are expected to consistently meet or exceed performance targets, and failure to do so can result in negative consequences, such as reduced opportunities for advancement or job insecurity [6].

1.1.5 Limited collaboration

Collaboration and teamwork may take a back seat to individual performance. Employees may be reluctant to share information or help others due to concerns about personal success and competition [7].

1.1.6 Stressful and demanding culture

The work culture in a hyper-competitive environment can be stressful, demanding, and driven by a sense of urgency [8]. The emphasis is often on immediate results, which can lead to a high-stress atmosphere.

1.1.7 High turnover rates

The intense nature of a hyper-competitive environment can contribute to high employee turnover. Some individuals may find it difficult to cope with the pressure and constant competition, leading them to seek employment elsewhere [9].

In this review, we discuss the causes and impact of a hyper-competitive work environment on an organization and its employees. We also discuss certain important solutions on how to deal with or change hyper-competitive work culture in your workplace.

2. Reasons for hyper-competitive behavior

There can be various reasons for hyper competitive behavior in the workplace. Here are some common factors that may contribute to this behavior:

2.1. Personal insecurities

Hypercompetitive individuals often have deep-rooted insecurities that drive their need to prove themselves and seek validation [10]. They may feel a constant pressure to outperform others to boost their self-esteem and establish their worth.

2.2. Performance-based culture

Work environments that place a strong emphasis on individual performance and reward a competitive mindset can fuel hyper competitive behavior [11]. When promotions, bonuses, or recognition are directly tied to individual accomplishments, employees may feel compelled to engage in hypercompetitive behavior to gain a competitive edge.

2.3. Fear of failure

Hypercompetitive individuals may have an intense fear of failure. They view every situation as a win-or-lose scenario and believe that their self-worth is determined solely by their achievements. This fear drives them to go to great lengths to ensure they come out on top, even at the expense of others [12].

2.4. Lack of trust and collaboration

A workplace culture that lacks trust and promotes a "survival of the fittest" mentality can foster hypercompetitive behavior [13]. When colleagues perceive each other as competitors rather than collaborators, it can create an environment where individuals are more likely to engage in hypercompetitive behaviors to protect their interests.

2.5. External pressure

Sometimes, hypercompetitive behavior may arise from external pressures, such as demanding clients, tight deadlines, or high-performance expectations from superiors [14]. The fear of falling behind or not meeting these expectations can drive individuals to become hypercompetitive in their pursuit of success.

2.6. Organizational or industry norms

Certain industries or organizations may have a hypercompetitive culture ingrained in their values and practices [15]. This can create an environment where employees are constantly comparing themselves to others and striving to outperform their colleagues.

2.7. Previous experiences or upbringing

Past experiences, upbringing, or competitive educational environments can also contribute to the development of hypercompetitive behavior [16]. Individuals who have been consistently rewarded for their competitive achievements or have been exposed to cutthroat environments may bring those behaviors into the workplace.

It's important to note that not all competitive behavior is unhealthy or detrimental. Healthy competition can drive innovation, productivity, and personal growth. However, when hypercompetitive behavior becomes disruptive, toxic, or hinders collaboration and teamwork, it can negatively impact the overall work environment and individual well-being.

3. Impact of hyper-competitive work culture on an organization

A hypercompetitive work culture can have various impacts on an organization, some of which are as follows:

3.1. Decreased Collaboration

Hypercompetition often promotes an individualistic mindset, where employees focus solely on outperforming their peers [17]. This can hinder collaboration and teamwork within the organization, leading to silos, reduced information sharing, and limited cross-functional cooperation.

3.2. High Employee Stress and Burnout

Hypercompetition can create a high-pressure work environment, with employees constantly striving to meet or exceed unrealistic goals. This can result in increased stress levels and higher rates of burnout among employees, leading to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates [18].

3.3. Toxic Work Environment

Hypercompetitive cultures can foster a toxic work environment where employees are pitted against each other, leading to backstabbing, undermining, and cutthroat behaviors [19]. Trust and camaraderie among colleagues may be diminished, negatively impacting morale and job satisfaction.

3.4. Reduced Innovation and Creativity

When employees are solely focused on beating their competition, they may become reluctant to take risks or explore new ideas [20]. This stifles innovation and creativity within the organization, as employees are more concerned with maintaining the status quo or avoiding failure.

3.5. Lack of Knowledge Sharing

In hypercompetitive cultures, employees may be hesitant to share knowledge or information with their peers for fear of losing a competitive advantage [21]. This leads to limited knowledge sharing, hindering the growth and development of employees and the organization as a whole.

3.6. Increased Employee Attrition

The intense pressure and cutthroat nature of a hypercompetitive work culture can lead to high turnover rates. Employees may seek more supportive and collaborative environments where they feel valued and where work-life balance is prioritized [22].

3.7. Diminished Employee Engagement and Loyalty

In a hypercompetitive environment, employees may become disengaged, as the focus on individual success overshadows collective goals and organizational values [23]. This can result in decreased loyalty and commitment to the organization, leading to decreased productivity and overall performance.

3.8. Adverse Impact on Organizational Reputation

A hypercompetitive work culture can negatively impact the organization's reputation, both internally and externally [24]. It may discourage potential talent from joining the organization and tarnish its image in the industry, affecting its ability to attract and retain top talent.

It is important for organizations to recognize these potential impacts and strive to foster a balanced and collaborative work culture [25]. By promoting teamwork, emphasizing employee well-being, and encouraging a supportive environment, organizations can enhance employee satisfaction, productivity, and long-term success.

4. Dealing with hyper competitive work culture

Dealing with hyper competitive individuals in the workplace can be challenging, but with the right approach, you can navigate this situation effectively [26]. Here are some strategies to help you manage hyper competitive colleagues:

4.1. Maintain professionalism

It's essential to remain professional and focused on your work [27]. Avoid getting caught up in the competition or engaging in negative behaviors. Stay true to your values and maintain a positive attitude.

4.2. Understand their motivations

Hypercompetitive people are often driven by a need to excel and outperform others [28]. Try to empathize with their perspective and recognize that their behavior may not be a personal attack against you. Understanding their motivations can help you handle the situation more objectively.

4.3. Set boundaries

Establish clear boundaries to protect your own well-being and ensure a healthy work environment [29]. Communicate assertively when necessary and let your hypercompetitive colleagues know if their behavior is affecting your productivity or causing unnecessary stress.

4.4. Focus on collaboration

Encourage a collaborative work environment by emphasizing teamwork and shared goals [30]. Redirect the competitive energy towards collective achievements rather than individual accomplishments. Emphasize the benefits of cooperation and the value of leveraging everyone's strengths.

4.5. Build alliances and support networks

Cultivate positive relationships with other colleagues who may share similar concerns about the hypercompetitive individual. Create a support network where you can discuss your experiences, share advice, and find solidarity [31]. This can help you navigate the situation more effectively and feel less isolated.

4.6. Communicate effectively

When interacting with hypercompetitive individuals, be clear, concise, and confident in your communication [32]. Focus on facts, maintain a calm demeanor, and avoid being defensive. By articulating your ideas effectively, you can assert your contributions and establish your credibility.

4.7. Celebrate achievements and promote recognition

Acknowledge and celebrate achievements within the team, including those of hypercompetitive individuals [33]. This can help alleviate some of their need for validation and create a more positive and inclusive work environment.

4.8. Seek guidance from supervisors or HR

If the hypercompetitive behavior persists and significantly affects your work or well-being, consider seeking guidance from your supervisor or human resources department [34]. They can provide additional support, mediate conflicts, or offer strategies to manage the situation effectively.

Remember, the key is to remain focused on your own growth, maintain a positive attitude, and contribute to a healthy work environment.

5. Changing a hypercompetitive work culture

Changing a hypercompetitive work culture can be a complex and gradual process, but with the right approach, it is possible to foster a more collaborative and balanced environment [35]. Here are some strategies to help shift the culture:

5.1. Lead by example

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the culture of an organization [36]. Leaders should model and promote collaborative behaviors, emphasize teamwork, and recognize the value of cooperation. By demonstrating a balanced and inclusive approach, leaders can inspire others to follow suit.

5.2. Communicate shared goals

Clearly communicate the organization's shared goals and the importance of collective achievements [37]. Emphasize that success is not solely dependent on individual accomplishments but rather on the combined efforts of the team. This helps shift the focus from individual competition to collective success.

5.3. Encourage teamwork and collaboration

Create opportunities for collaboration and teamwork [38]. Encourage cross-functional projects, establish interdepartmental teams, and provide platforms for knowledge sharing and idea exchange. Foster a sense of unity and cooperation among employees.

5.4. Recognize and reward collaboration

Implement recognition and reward systems that emphasize collaboration and teamwork [39]. Acknowledge and celebrate collective achievements, collaboration efforts, and individuals who contribute to a positive work environment. This sends a clear message that collaboration is valued and appreciated.

5.5. Foster a supportive and inclusive environment

Create a work environment where employees feel supported, respected, and included [40]. Encourage open communication, active listening, and empathy. Encourage diverse perspectives and ideas, and ensure everyone feels valued for their contributions.

5.6. Provide development and growth opportunities

Offer professional development programs and opportunities for employees to enhance their skills, learn from each other, and grow together [41]. This helps foster a sense of shared growth and encourages a collaborative mindset.

5.7. Establish clear expectations and guidelines

Set clear expectations for behavior and performance that align with the desired culture. Clearly define values, ethical guidelines, and expected standards of conduct [42]. This provides employees with a framework to follow and helps ensure that the desired cultural shift is sustained.

5.8. Train and educate employees

Provide training and education on topics such as teamwork, conflict resolution, effective communication, and emotional intelligence [43]. Equip employees with the necessary skills to collaborate effectively and manage conflicts in a constructive manner.

5.9. Seek employee feedback and involvement

Involve employees in the process of cultural change [44]. Seek their input, ideas, and feedback on how to foster a more collaborative work environment. Engage them in decision-making processes and empower them to be part of the cultural transformation.

5.10. Address hypercompetitive behaviors

Address hypercompetitive behaviors promptly and consistently [45]. Provide constructive feedback to individuals who engage in unhealthy competition and highlight the negative impact it has on the team and work environment. Encourage alternative behaviors and provide support for individuals to change their mindset.

Changing a work culture takes time and effort. It requires a collective commitment from leadership, managers, and employees at all levels [46]. Consistency, transparency, and continuous reinforcement of the desired cultural values are key to creating a more collaborative and balanced work environment

6. Conclusion

While a hyper-competitive work environment can drive individuals to excel and achieve outstanding results, it can also have negative consequences on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. It is important for organizations to strike a balance between fostering healthy competition and maintaining a supportive and sustainable work environment.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

We thank Mahsa University for the support and motivation.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interests among the authors of this paper.

References

- [1] Vera L. B. Dolan (2023) '...but if you tell anyone, I'll deny we ever met:' the experiences of academics with invisible disabilities in the neoliberal university, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 36:4, 689-706, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2021.1885075
- [2] Madhani, Pankaj M., *Competitiveness and Sustaining Performance: Integrating Sales and Marketing* (2016). SCMS Journal of Indian Management, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 19-36, January-March 2016 , Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2762297>
- [3] Forbes, T., Hallier, J., & Kelly, L. (2004). Doctors as managers: investors and reluctant in a dual role. *Health Services Management Research*, 17(3), 167-176.
- [4] Holt, G. D., Love, P. E., & Jawahar Nesan, L. (2000). Employee empowerment in construction: an implementation model for process improvement. *Team performance management: An international journal*, 6(3/4), 47-51.
- [5] Storey, J. A. (2000). Fracture lines' in the career environment. *The future of career*, 21-36.
- [6] Ashford, S. J., Lee, C., & Bobko, P. (1989). Content, cause, and consequences of job insecurity: A theory-based measure and substantive test. *Academy of Management journal*, 32(4), 803-829.
- [7] Pfeffer, J., & Veiga, J. F. (1999). Putting people first for organizational success. *Academy of management perspectives*, 13(2), 37-48.
- [8] Halford, A. J., Burrell, A. G., Liemohn, M. W., Jones Jr, M., Maute, A., Pulkkinen, T. I., ... & Klenzing, J. (2023). Cultivating a culture of inclusivity in heliophysics. *Frontiers in Physics*, 11, 139.
- [9] Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (1999). 'An assembly line in the head': work and employee relations in the call centre. *Industrial relations journal*, 30(2), 101-117.

- [10] Day, A. (2019). *Disruption, change and transformation in organisations: A human relations perspective*. Routledge.
- [11] Lee, H. W. (2020). Interpersonal competition in organization: an investigation of antecedents. *International Journal of Manpower*, 41(8), 1363-1383.
- [12] Martin, A. (2010). *Building classroom success: Eliminating academic fear and failure*. A&C Black.
- [13] Vangen, S., & Huxham, C. (2003). Nurturing collaborative relations: Building trust in interorganizational collaboration. *The Journal of applied behavioral science*, 39(1), 5-31.
- [14] Biedenbach, T., & Söderholm, A. (2008). The challenge of organizing change in hypercompetitive industries: a literature review. *Journal of change management*, 8(2), 123-145.
- [15] Zellmer-Bruhn, M. E., Gibson, C. B., & Aldag, R. J. (2001). Time flies like an arrow: Tracing antecedents and consequences of temporal elements of organizational culture. *The international handbook of organizational culture and climate*, 22-52.
- [16] Sirmon, D. G., & Hitt, M. A. (2003). Managing resources: Linking unique resources, management, and wealth creation in family firms. *Entrepreneurship theory and practice*, 27(4), 339-358.
- [17] Cahn, N., Carbone, J., & Levit, N. (2017). Gender and the Tournament: Reinventing Antidiscrimination Law in an Age of Inequality. *Tex. L. Rev.*, 96, 425.
- [18] Nagar, K. (2012). Organizational commitment and job satisfaction among teachers during times of burnout. *Vikalpa*, 37(2), 43-60.
- [19] Miller, C. D. (2019). Exploring the crabs in the barrel syndrome in organizations. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 26(3), 352-371.
- [20] Hamel, G. (2006). The why, what, and how of management innovation. *Harvard business review*, 84(2), 72.
- [21] Yoon, S., Kim, S. L., Go, C., & Yun, S. (2020). Knowledge sharing, hypercompetitiveness, and contextual Factors: Investigating a three-way effect. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 35, 489-502.
- [22] Munn, S. L. (2013). Unveiling the work–life system: the influence of work–life balance on meaningful work. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 15(4), 401-417.
- [23] Robinson, S. L., Wang, W., & Kiewitz, C. (2014). Coworkers behaving badly: The impact of coworker deviant behavior upon individual employees. *Annu. Rev. Organ. Psychol. Organ. Behav.*, 1(1), 123-143.
- [24] Heames, J., & Harvey, M. (2006). Workplace bullying: A cross-level assessment. *Management Decision*, 44(9), 1214-1230.
- [25] Bertels, S., Papania, L., & Papania, D. (2010). *Embedding sustainability in organizational culture. A systematic review of the body of knowledge*. London, Canada: Network for Business Sustainability, 25.
- [26] Ang, I. (2011). Navigating complexity: From cultural critique to cultural intelligence. *Continuum*, 25(6), 779-794.
- [27] Evetts, J. (2013). Professionalism: Value and ideology. *Current sociology*, 61(5-6), 778-796.
- [28] Swab, R. G., & Johnson, P. D. (2019). Steel sharpens steel: A review of multilevel competition and competitiveness in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 40(2), 147-165.
- [29] Chatwal, M. S., Kamal, A. H., & Marron, J. M. (2023). Fear of Saying No (FOSNO): Setting Boundaries With Our Patients and Ourselves. *American Society of Clinical Oncology Educational Book*, 43, e390598.
- [30] Erdoğan, V. (2019). Integrating 4C skills of 21st century into 4 language skills in EFL classes. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 7(11), 113-124.
- [31] Banks, J. A., Cookson, P., Gay, G., Hawley, W. D., Irvine, J. J., Nieto, S., ... & Stephan, W. G. (2001). Diversity within unity: Essential principles for teaching and learning in a multicultural society. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(3), 196-203.
- [32] Chungyalpa, W., & Karishma, T. (2016). Best practices and emerging trends in recruitment and selection. *Journal of Entrepreneurship & Organization Management*, 5(2), 1-5.
- [33] Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2010). *The five practices of exemplary leadership (Vol. 237)*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [34] Cowan, R. L., Clayton, E., & Bochantin, J. (2021). Human resources as an important actor in workplace bullying situations: Where we have been and where we should go. *Pathways of Job-related Negative Behaviour*, 477-494.

- [35] Staber, U., & Sydow, J. (2002). Organizational adaptive capacity: A structuration perspective. *Journal of management inquiry*, 11(4), 408-424.
- [36] Tushman, M. L. (2017). Innovation Streams and Executive Leadership: R&D leadership plays a central role in shaping a firm's ability to both exploit existing capabilities and explore new technological domains. *Research-Technology Management*, 60(6), 42-47.
- [37] Riege, A. (2005). Three-dozen knowledge-sharing barriers managers must consider. *Journal of knowledge management*, 9(3), 18-35.
- [38] Tarricone, P., & Luca, J. (2002). Employees, teamwork and social interdependence—a formula for successful business?. *Team Performance Management: An International Journal*, 8(3/4), 54-59.
- [39] Bridges, D., Davidson, R. A., Soule Odegard, P., Maki, I. V., & Tomkowiak, J. (2011). Interprofessional collaboration: three best practice models of interprofessional education. *Medical education online*, 16(1), 6035.
- [40] Boekhorst, J. A. (2015). The role of authentic leadership in fostering workplace inclusion: A social information processing perspective. *Human Resource Management*, 54(2), 241-264.
- [41] Weng, Q., McElroy, J. C., Morrow, P. C., & Liu, R. (2010). The relationship between career growth and organizational commitment. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 77(3), 391-400.
- [42] Alizadeh, A., Dirani, K. M., & Qiu, S. (2020). Ethics, code of conduct and ethical climate: implications for human resource development. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 45(8/9), 674-690.
- [43] Mulle, K. (2016). Emotional intelligence training. Association for Talent Development.
- [44] Barratt-Pugh, L., Bahn, S., & Gakere, E. (2013). Managers as change agents: Implications for human resource managers engaging with culture change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.
- [45] Hanssen-Bauer, J., & Snow, C. C. (1996). Responding to hypercompetition: the structure and processes of a regional learning network organization. *Organization science*, 7(4), 413-427.
- [46] Biedenbach, T., & Söderholm, A. (2008). The challenge of organizing change in hypercompetitive industries: a literature review. *Journal of change management*, 8(2), 123-145.