
Turning Competition into Collaboration



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Competition is healthy but winning can come at a hefty price. Sometimes the swiftest way forward is to replace conflict with collaboration.

According to Hindu mythology, Garuda was a giant bird, whose mother had been tricked into slavery by her evil sister, the mother of a hundred serpents.

One day, tired of the constant humiliation, Garuda asked the serpents what they wanted in return for freeing her from the curse of slavery.

“If you bring us the nectar of immortality, we will free your mother,” the serpents told him.

Whoever drank from the pot of nectar would become immortal, invincible and a dire threat to the gods. Therefore, the entire army of the gods protected it fiercely.

Garuda, undaunted by the challenge, soared towards the heavens, so determined to free his mother that when he flapped his wings, even the

biggest mountains shook in fear of being uprooted.

Meanwhile, in the heavens, Indra, the king of gods, was seeing bad omens that were making him anxious. He sought an audience with Brihaspati, god-guru and master of planet Jupiter.

“Pray, tell me why I see bad omens today?” Indra asked.

After pondering the question, Brihaspati suggested: ‘It could be because the mighty Garuda is in flight towards the heavens to get the pot of nectar.’

“Garuda is no ordinary creature,” Brihaspati cautioned. “He is blessed with enormous strength and agility. He can change his form at will.”

Indra quickly mobilised his army and ordered them to guard the coveted nectar.

When Garuda arrived at the gate, the flapping of his huge wings created an unprecedented dust storm, blinding the army. Attacks and counter attacks continued until a large part of the army lay vanquished. Garuda moved towards three concentric rings of security that guarded the nectar, changing his form many times to remain unnoticed until he reached the pot. He seized the nectar and was just about to fly when Indra attacked him with his huge mace.

“Indra, I am blessed with such strength that I can carry the entire burden of the earth, seas and the heavens effortlessly on my wings. However as a mark of respect, I will leave one of my wings with you,” said Garuda, “But I cannot give you the nectar. It is not for me.”

Touched by the gesture, Indra held out a hand in friendship.

“Garuda, whoever you give this nectar of immortality to will create a lot of trouble for us. If you don’t need the nectar yourself, please return it to me,” he said.

“Indra, I need this to free my mother from a curse she was tricked into. I promised the hundred serpents that I would bring them the nectar,” reasoned Garuda.

“My friend, please go ahead and complete your promise,” said Indra, withdrawing.

After the long journey back, Garuda gave nectar to the serpents. They, in turn, released his mother from the curse.

As they prepared to imbibe the nectar that would make them invincible, Garuda asked “don’t you want to bathe before drinking this divine nectar?”

The serpents agreed. While they bathed, Indra retrieved back the pot of nectar.

Garuda kept his promise, Indra kept his pot of nectar. They both won.

Winning without a fight

Conflicts are inevitable but a war helps no one. While defeat could be humiliating, victory could be too costly.

In 2006, a medical devices company grossly overpaid for an acquisition, just to outbid its arch-rival. **Described as the second worst in history**, the acquisition resulted in the company losing over 46 percent of its value in a matter of months.

Sometimes, the winner can be crushed under the weight of its own victory.

Sun Tzu, the Chinese military general and master strategist says, “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting it.”

One way to subdue the enemy could be to move beyond the pessimism or arrogance and identify complementary interests. As Abraham Lincoln once asked “am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?”

Rivalry cannot be wished away, but as the **Blue Ocean Strategy** suggests, it can be made irrelevant by focusing on complementary interests. This is easier said than done. Often, when a conflict presents itself, emotions cloud decision-making and a costly, unnecessary battle ensues.

Collaborate with your competitors

In the workplace or marketplace, quibbling doesn’t help anyone. The swiftest way forward is to look for ways in which collaboration can be sought and conflict avoided. It is the best, most efficient utilisation of resources. To win the war, you may no longer need to worry about winning or losing, you can make the battle irrelevant.

Some weeks back, I had the occasion to meet a distinguished scientist^[1] with a zealous interest in cancer research. She spoke of how big pharmaceutical companies must shed old mind sets and collaborate to bring together complementing capabilities in their mission towards finding a cure for cancer. She believed that complex research is best conducted if different specialised entities run specific pieces of the research rather than one company pretending that it has the competency to run all the pieces.

As current conflicts between great nations and feeble military juntas no doubt demonstrate, no one really wins a war. Perhaps, the days of valiant battlefield cries and brandishing might are over. Instead, pragmatism dictates that the focus should be to find areas of collaboration in the interest of the mission. When considering workplace rivalry or market competition, bigger (or stronger) is no longer better, focused is.

"The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom," says Sun Tzu.

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^[1] Dr Swati Piramal is Vice-chairperson of the Piramal Enterprises and one of India's leading industrialists and scientists.

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Venugopal Gupta Venu is a start-up specialist and runs a venture acceleration programme that helps early-stage start-ups build their ideas into sustainable businesses.