
Are You on a Collision Course with a Workplace Rival?



By Henning Piezunka , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise; Wonjae Lee, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology; Richard Haynes, Commodity Futures Trading Commission; and Matthew S. Bothner, ESMT Berlin

Data from Formula 1 crashes explain how high-stakes collisions with rivals happen.

An undeniable part of Formula 1's appeal is the hair-raising speed of the sport. The margin of victory is often measured in milliseconds – and mistakes just as fleeting can trigger spectacular collisions that end races, even lives. But don't let the breathless pace distract you: Our research shows that to understand the origins of F1 crashes, you have to look beyond the race itself and consider where the embroiled drivers stand in the league's pecking order.

Our recent paper in *PNAS*, "[Escalation of competition into conflict in competitive networks of Formula One drivers](#)", investigates the factors that escalate competition into dangerous conflict. By examining F1 Championship crashes from 1970 to 2014, we find that collisions are usually not random. They tend to occur between status-equivalent drivers.

We looked at 193,395 driver pairings over 44 years, 506 of which ended in a collision that eliminated at least one driver from competition. Pairs of drivers who crashed tended to have overlapping patterns of wins and losses over the season. By dint of these similarities in their performance record, they would have held roughly the same status in the racing league at the time of the collision.

Business parallels

What does this have to do with business? We argue that the toxic competitive dynamic behind these crashes can also be found in many environments, including companies. In the corporate environment, analogous collisions occur when competition between two executives of comparable rank spins out of control, flaring into open conflict. These battles do damage in at least two ways: They harm the careers of the combatants by exposing lapses in professionalism, while also siphoning valuable time and attention away from organisational goals.

Destructive workplace dynamics

It's easy to find clashes between rivals in the business world. But how do they happen? There are a few factors: Uncertainty around status when there is a lack of hierarchy can lead to unhealthy conflicts, driving rivals to establish superiority over those with similar stature.

Social dynamics can fuel the fire too. Colleagues might draw similarities between two rivals in playful comments that make both feel too close for comfort in terms of status. This can lead to one or both rivals feeling pressure to adopt provocative behaviour toward their "twin". One step too far can be all it takes to trigger an all-out war.

Companies can try to prevent this by taking steps to lessen hierarchy, e.g. abolishing job titles or embracing flat management structures such as "holacracy". However, our Formula 1 results suggest that these measures may backfire, since status ambiguity – which flourishes under conditions of reduced formal hierarchy – engenders conflict.

The same can be said for strategic change initiatives that wipe out the established order among employees, e.g. mergers and restructuring. Like when previously separated groups of prisoners are shifted to the same cell block, you expect to see brawling, as the prisoners try to define their

standing in the newly constituted group.

These dynamics bear watching over a significant period of time. In Formula 1, we saw that the link between status-similarity and collision was discernible only in the later part of the racing season. The tensions that fuel crashes appear to be cumulative. As the hierarchy gradually comes into focus, status-peers can't ignore each other and the destructive interplay sets in.

Surprisingly, we also found that the link between status-similarity and collision was weaker in dangerous race-day weather conditions. Our explanation is that drivers' status anxieties were not strong enough to completely overshadow personal safety concerns. It was in the absence of inclement weather that we observed drivers bringing those anxieties to the fore.

How to avoid a crash

Managers aiming to prevent their employees from colliding, then, should instil caution of the kind drivers would feel while racing in a rainstorm. Pointing to serious external threats, such as potentially disruptive start-ups or fast-changing consumer habits, may induce combatants to side line their interpersonal conflicts for the greater good.

You can also encourage employees to practice a technique we refer to as *anticipatory self-discipline*. Needless to say, you can also try this technique yourself, if you feel that your competition with a particular colleague might be destined to go south.

It is all about remembering that you are the one who ultimately controls your own actions. Your rivalry can only derail you if you allow it. So prior to engaging with your opponent, reflect on your core values. Let the kind of person you want to be set a steady course for your behaviour during an upcoming exchange with your rival. Don't let your competition with a colleague take precedence over organisational challenges and objectives.

We are not suggesting that you make yourself an easy target. Definitely remain aware of your antagonist and be ready to respond to any aggressive moves. But never let them pull focus from your end goals.

Henning Piezunka is an Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise at INSEAD.

Wonjae Lee is a professor at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST).

Richard Haynes is a Senior Economist with the U.S. government's Commodity Futures Trading Commission.

Matthew S. Bothner is Professor of Strategy and Deutsche Telekom Chair in Leadership and HR Development at ESMT Berlin.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/are-you-collision-course-workplace-rival>

About the author(s)

Henning Piezunka is an Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise at INSEAD and a Visiting Professor at The Wharton School.