

## COMPETITION KILLS INNOVATION?

Recently I have been prompted to explore the relevance and reality of competition and how it has played out in my personal life, my relationships and how I see it showing up in the economy in the wider world. With regards to the latter, I am on seriously dodgy ground but feel drawn to make comment! I'm no economist but somewhere in the recesses of my mind I remember hearing claims about competition being good for the economy. I notice that statement worries me and I find myself wanting to challenge it.

The seeds of my enquiry were sown over the past few months, one of which took root after reading *Wilful Blindness*. In her book, Margaret Heffernan suggests that *competition drives us towards similarity* and that our lack of awareness of this tendency can find us reaping unwanted, if not deeply damaging consequences. I realised that from my personal experience, I related more to the notion that *similarity drives us towards competition*. With my growing understanding of complexity sciences, I saw that, actually, both propositions are probably true. Let me unpack this a bit.

What exactly does competition look like between human beings? As far as I can see, it is what plays out between us as we try to 'win' over anyone else in the race/ game/ frame. We have to play by the rules, on the same 'field'. We have to play 'fair' to be a worthy winner. If we do not 'look' the part or have the right equipment, generally we will not be accepted. Oscar Pistorius, the paralympic sprinter, is a great example of this. When he showed up on an athletics track with his prosthetic blades wanting to compete against able-bodied runners, he was first denied because his difference was seen as giving him an 'unfair' advantage! In other words, we can only earn the right to compete by being as constrained as every other player. I can't compete with you if you are playing squash and I am playing table tennis because we are not playing the same game and we are not on the same field of play. If I am selling coaching services and you are selling financial products, we are not competitors.

Competition requires a tightly constrained field of play, in which all players attempt to become the best/ most successful. In sport this may call on us to run faster, throw further, hit harder, score more. In business it means getting more customers, more sales, more turnover, more profit. Competing for the same customers buying essentially the same products (like mobile phones) sets us on the path of a converging pattern in which the variables – the essential differences between available products become less and less. In this scenario it becomes harder for customers to choose because in general terms, any product will do what they want. From a complexity perspective, increasing similarity further constrains a system which then makes it more vulnerable to collapse - unless difference is introduced or until someone or something breaks 'out of the box' bringing forward a new innovation around which new cycles of competing will begin.

Competition as the primary pattern does not make for a healthy economy. An advantage of competition is that it does refine and improve what is already present – by driving variation out of the system. In contrast, creativity and innovation arise when there is greater diversity and fewer constraints. This is vital in keeping the system as a whole aerated and alive. Too much difference, and the system will disintegrate. We need balance. How much more powerful would we be if we could consciously adjust levers to drive towards similarity and difference by choice according to need and context?

What intrigues me most right now, is making a connection with something that has been emerging over the last couple years - in particular, conversations that have questioned how few women there are in Board Rooms and in senior leadership positions. Perhaps this has become a more palatable proposition because the economy (current game, field and rules) is failing and more people are recognising the urgent need for diversity to revive the system? Somewhere in our collective subconscious perhaps we can see that if the game, the rules or the players don't change then there will be nothing left to play with and nothing worth playing for?

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