

Keeping future rivals down: New study predicts social undermining among coworkers

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Competition among employees does not always produce the best of results. When the stakes are high, unhealthy competition arises between coworkers. In a recent study, researchers at Kühne Logistics University (KLU) came to the conclusion that in such environments employees begin to undermine their coworkers, particularly those who could very well surpass them on the path to career success one day.

It often starts with a flippant remark, with someone who “forgot” to relay some important information, but it can also go as far as sabotaging someone’s career. Social undermining, a negative behavior intended to impede interpersonal relationships at work and damage its victims’ professional achievements, presents a serious contemporary problem in many companies.

Previously, it had been assumed that competition among coworkers existed mainly between those on a similar hierarchy level, or that social undermining was aimed at those of higher status. A current study by Susan Reh, Christian Tröster, and Niels Van Quaquebeke from the KLU contests this perspective. “Envy and the negative behavior it produces can just as easily be directed at people of lower professional standing.” Reh, a doctoral candidate, joined forces with Tröster and Van Quaquebeke, both professors of Leadership and Organizational Behavior, in examining comparison processes used in companies and the resulting behaviors. For their research, they implemented a variety of experiments and survey techniques.

“If I notice that a coworker has a history of rapid career advancement, I can only assume this will continue into the future. This presents a threat to my own position.” In summarizing this phenomenon, Tröster claimed this could be reason enough for many coworkers, if at first subtly, to begin sabotaging the “rising star”. “In fearing for my own standing, I’ll do whatever I can to prevent anyone else’s advancement.”

Another aspect of the research indicates that this behavior is not reserved for working teams. It can, in fact, affect the selection process of new employees. “High-performing leaders expect a lot from their teams and will only want to hire the very best,” explained Van Quaquebeke. “In comparison, a leader with mediocre standing will likely hire people even less competent than they are. They would rather work with an average team than risk being surpassed by one of their more talented subordinates.”

The research established that attempts at social undermining most often take place in companies with a pronounced competition culture, e.g. in the form of performance-based bonus systems. “When everyone has their eye on that bonus, they start comparing themselves and competing against one another. In that kind of situation, what matters is securing your own interest, often at the expense of your coworkers,” pointed out Van Quaquebeke.

Based on their results, the researchers were able to draw a number of conclusions. “Companies ought to really consider when and how they implement bonus systems,” determined Reh. Managers and HR directors need to ask themselves what level of competition is healthy for their teams. Reh added, “Otherwise, high potential employees who have been arduously groomed and cultivated by their employers may well be sabotaged and hindered in their career advancement by their coworkers.”

In addition, Reh presented a further recommendation for employees: They should seek out the highest performing managers and coworkers possible. “At first it may feel exhausting to subject oneself to high performance standards environments. However, in the long run, it is far better than working under someone who, because of concerns for their own position, will hinder your future advancement.”

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Keeping (Future) Rivals Down: Temporal Social Comparison Predicts Coworker Social Undermining via Future Status Threat and Envy appeared in the Journal of Applied Psychology.

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