On Systems and the Competitive Environment (Social Contract, Part 2)

Season 6, Episode 2 – originally released 11 March 2021

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

In part one of the series on the social contract, I presented the general ideas and background, the social contracts that we all live under in the West anyway, have served us for a long time. They provide the basis for our membership and societies and organizations, what individuals give them and what they receive in return. It was also clear that there are criticisms against the idea of the social contract, how it enables a sense of differentiation among members and reinforces those differences despite efforts to change them. But if only it were so simple to remove or abolish those factors that enable such differentiation so that all would be treated as equals. So why can't it be that simple?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

Now that I've talked about the construct of the social contract, what I want to do is I want to turn my attention with respect to the ongoing discussion about systemic racism. [And] really "systemic" anything. You know, when I hear the word "systemic" applied in this sort of a fashion as something that we are saying is stacking the deck against people, what I hear is that the effects are very, very tangible. They're very real and there is a very significant impact. But the causes are really, really difficult to put a finger on. The causes are very, you know, can be very nebulous. In the case of racism, you might be able to or identify a particular individual or a set of individuals who have very obviously strong negative beliefs, bigotry, chauvinism that you can say they are definitely causing harm. They're perpetuating this the system. But even if you remove those individuals from the environment, isolate them in some way, doesn't seem to solve the problem.

[Establishing] causation is difficult. You can't really put your hands around what is the totality of what's creating this. So when you the use of the word *systemic*, it sort of implies the whole thing, the whole environment is in some way corrupt. So what I want to do is I want to explore that a little bit, because to me, if we're going to try to get people to come to the table and discuss tough issues about what really is fair and equitable for all people, we really do have to come to grips (better grips) with what we're referring to as this systemic thing, systemic racism, systemic sexism, systemic, whatever that is causing inequality to remain persistent.

There's two things that kind of come to mind. And one of them I think I want to talk about first is probably in the discussions about this. What you tend to hear, I believe, is what is a focus on interpersonal communication or interpersonal actions that are identified as contributing to this systemic problem. The reason why I want to bring that up first is because a lot of the things that get

discussed or that have been discussed tend to be at that level--in terms of what is being presented as explanations or specific problems that have to be cured.

To give you an example and just a couple of examples of terms that I hear that are kind of of this nature, one of them is *unconscious bias,* which is how individuals innately, without consciously doing so, categorize people and the social environment. And because it's innate, it's something that that people just inherently do without ... really thinking about it. And the concern is that we subconsciously then say or do things that are perpetuating racist, sexist attitudes. There's a lot of different theories about how this works or some of the literature talks about similarity-attraction theory where humans--because they tend to favor those who look, act or think like they do, the unconscious bias produces reactions against those who are different. There are also confirmation biases such as humans who would basically favor something that sort of comports with what they already believe about other people, even when presented with disconfirming evidence that shows that, well, [that] perception is simply wrong. And obviously so, even if presented overwhelming factual evidence to show that the myth is totally bogus because it disconfirms with what people have been led to believe, then they would discount it and they'll just, you know, latch on to information that comports with their biases.

Microaggression is another one. This is one that gets a lot of attention. Microaggression is described as words or actions by individuals that communicate some sort of hostility, things like a word or something that one says that shows their displeasure at another party. And the key with these is that they typically happen in commonplace events. So it's sort of like a snarky word or two at added into a statement unnecessarily [to show] that communicating with the other person is not appreciated.

Both ideas--unconscious bias and microaggressions--they have their criticisms. I don't want to get into that [now, as] that's not really the point of raising these. But what I want to say is that we look at what is typically proffered as the remedy for these kinds of issues. They typically have some of the same components. [A] self-awareness component, so that if you are in a particular situation, you have to be aware of your biases and be careful about what you say, do, or think. It involves self reflection, getting people together to show empathy towards each other. And then, of course, there's humility to recognize the mistakes that we make and seek to remedy them--you know, show compassion rather than just ignore the bad feelings that one may have caused. That has been the focus, I think, for a lot of the conversation.

But I want to give a different perspective on this, because while so much attention is paid to interactions between people, I'm not so sure that that alone explains the systemic nature of the problems that we're discussing here. OK, let's say that we do, in fact, bring everybody to the table and we show empathy. We become far better at our own self awareness. We exercise greater humility. I don't know if that is in itself sufficient to overcome what we're talking about. There seems to be more and I'm going to offer that it is grounded around competition. It is what we think about competition at an individual, organizational, or societal level. And the reason why I talk about it is because competition is at the heart of a lot of what we do and what we are. Competition is very pervasive. It's pretty much everywhere. The way that we compete or the nature and the character of the way that we compete is at the heart of what's perpetuating the systemic problems that we're talking about.

I'm going to give you two examples to give you an idea of where this idea comes from. One comes from the *Talking About Organizations Podcast* episode that we did on the Charlie Chaplin movie *Modern Times* (episode 53). And I'm going to specifically refer to a point that I made with some of my teammates regarding a scene in which Charlie Chaplin, a.k.a. The Tramp, learns about an available job in a factory and you cut to the scene in the factory where the factory gates are closed and there are hundreds and hundreds of men, all men outside of the factory waiting for the gate to open so they can try to be one of the three who would be allowed in to get a job. And Charlie Chaplin, you know, in the scene, it's a hilarious scene. Charlie Chaplin literally, in the fit of excitement, just dances his way through the crowd. Nobody stops him or anything, just dance his way through the crowd and he just magically reaches the gate. At the moment, it opens and he is the third person in and suddenly the gate closes behind him. So out of hundreds of people, three get the job.

The statement that I made then was, you know, when we start talking about opening doors, opportunities for minorities, for women, the concern is, is that, well, if you don't actually find ways to increase the number of people who can get inside the gate, all you're doing is increasing the crowd outside the gate who can't get in. The competition gets that much tighter. And, of course, what would be the the reaction, the real reaction. If somebody like the Tramp started working its way through the crowd like that, the crowd would not treat that very kindly.

In addition to that, there's also kind of the sense of what it means to be the winner or the meaning of winning. And I'm going to use another movie. This one is the the Pixar movie *Cars*, and it's how the movie opens in which the lead character, Lightning McQueen, a racecar, is inside his trailer in the dark by himself, psyching himself up for a race. Among the things that he says is, "One winner, 42 losers." *One winner, 42 losers?* In fact, when we think about what that means for the the nature and the character of competition, if that is how we think about it, we're where winning is reserved essentially for the very, very few. It is almost little wonder why the competition may very well be contributing to an unhealthy climate.

Now, I came across an article very, very recently and it comes out of the Academy of Management Annals by To, Kilduff, and Roskiewicz (2020) and this is an article that talks about interpersonal competition and the ways in which it can be the way that competition can be beneficial in some way or can become harmful. And I'm only going to touch on a couple of points, but I think it's something that I think gives us a clue as to the role that competition plays in the current situation. There's different ways of looking at other competitors. They cited literature about challenges and threats--the challenge being more of the positive aspect in which one has and I'm going to quote here, "the confidence that with effort, the demands of a stressful situation can be overcome." And a threat is an instance in which an individual has a lower chance or a very low chance of being able to overcome.

When we think about competition in sports, we probably are thinking that everything is pretty much a challenge because everybody has the capacity to be able to overcome and defeat the opponent. But obviously, when we're talking about other types of competition, such as the examples that I gave of the Charlie Chaplin scene where the competitors are threats because you either get the job or you don't have money. The way that you see the competition, therefore kind of talks about or speaks to

the way in which you deal with it at an individual level. If you are very well, you see the competition as a challenge because you think you can overcome it. [Especially] if you have had past successes, your confidence or your capacity to overcome may very well increase. Your ambition can be seen as fuel. Group cohesion -- if you're in a strong group with cohesion, [the] group climate can lead to greater confidence in competing at a group level or a organizational level. In the case where the competition is seen as a threat, one's own performance decreases, or potentially decreases. There could be fears of losing control, concerns over if like, for example, if one is on a losing streak or has had prior bad performance, that that could influence the outcome in a negative fashion and can make the competitors seem more ominous. And certainly breakdown of group cohesion or if the group starts to fight within itself can definitely impact the way that one perceives the competition.

There's also impacts on the competition itself. If one is at high risk of losing or failing, there is a greater probability of resorting to various undesirable behaviors, such as cheating, undermining, sabotaging the opponent. And they can also increase if there is, again a quote, "uncertainty surrounding the rules or process of the competition, such as how performance will be assessed." If you don't know what the rules are, if you have no way of knowing what the rules are or certainly don't have any control over what the rules are, that can offer the feeling that the competition is <take your pick>: the competition is rigged, the competition is unfair, unjust and so on.

So when I look at what I just talked about with competition, I started to see a little something that aligns a little bit more with what I view as the concerns driving this inequity in the social contract. It's in effect that the competition or the sense of competition has become really, really unhealthy. And what I mean by unhealthy is that there's no sense that the ones who are winning or the ones who are losing deserve to be there based on their merits alone, that there's other factors that simply weigh in and that the rules of the game are opaque and most importantly, that the cost of losing is extraordinarily high.

So the outcome of this competition is vitally important for all parties concerned. The way that the lines are drawn between, say, one side or another appears to be such that they see each other as threats. I think this is true on both sides is that both sides see the competition as being rigged against them. And of course, that that will not make sense to one side that the other side would [feel] that way. But indeed, you know, the rules overall, the rules are have been very, very uncertain [during the pandemic]. And I think the uncertainty that was brought about by the pandemic brought that to a even greater level. And in pandemic times, let's think about, you know, sort of like the cutline between, as in the modern Times factory scene, the cut-line between the three who got in and the hundreds or thousands who are left out. If we're looking at a regular job application where you have three positions available and you have thousands of applicants, how do you really know kidding differentiate the three best candidates at some level, even all of those who are involved in the process are trying to be as fair, rational, objective as possible and see themselves as being fully capable of justifying their actions, it is ultimately going to be hard to really no-kidding separate, be able to delineate, exactly where the cut-line was between third place and fourth. Of course, that's just one single instance of a competition.

There are competitive events going on all the time between individuals, between individuals and organizations, among organizations, between organizations and society, etc.. So the competition is very multilayered. It's very complicated. In some ways. The outcomes do not appear to be random, which then raises the natural questions when in the aggregate, these competitive events seem to show that certain biases in the competitions exist, are prevalent, are influencing decisions made no matter what outcomes, no matter how rationally you can justify a decision or an assessment of the performance of the competitors within the environment, there's going to be questions around it to say that it was not a just decision, it wasn't fair. For whatever reason.

This is what I'm going to get into in part three of this series. You know, we have in many ways tried through legal and normative means to try to level the playing field, to try to accommodate certain classes of people because they have been historically discriminated against and not been given a fair opportunity to compete. But to what extent do these efforts address the underlying structural problem in which the competition is, in effect, limited or limiting the ability for everybody to participate equally and fairly and to have a reasonable chance of having a favorable outcome? In Part Three, what I'm going to explore are some factors that indeed introduce those limits, things that contribute to the systemic bias that's built into this competitive framework. I hope you'll join me.

… And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

All the Best!
Tom Galvin