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Harvard Business Review



OCTOBER 2011
REPRINT F1110D

DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

If You Want to Win, Tell Your Team It's Losing (a Little)

by Jonah Berger

Defend Your Research



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HBR puts some surprising findings to the test

If You Want to Win, Tell Your Team It's Losing (a Little)

The finding: People who are slightly behind in a competition are more likely to win than those who are slightly ahead.

The research: Jonah Berger told subjects that they were competing with a person in another room to see who could make the fastest keystrokes and that the winner would receive a cash prize. After one round he gave the subjects feedback, saying that they were far behind, slightly behind, tied, or slightly ahead of their competitor. Only the people told that they were slightly behind picked up the pace significantly in the second round. Overall, the subjects in that group performed faster than the “slightly ahead” group.

The challenge: Are you really more likely to win if you're losing a little? **Professor Berger, defend your research.**

Berger: The results were clear. Effort increased dramatically only for people who believed they were slightly behind in the competition. What's more, we found a similar effect when we analyzed real-world field data from 60,000 basketball games, including 18,000 NBA games. The relationship between the score and the likelihood of winning was fairly linear. For every two points a team was ahead, its chances of winning increased by about 7%—except for this major discontinuity right in the middle. Teams that were down by one point at halftime were more likely to win than teams that were ahead by one point at halftime. They won as much as 8% more often than they would have if the relationship had stayed linear.

HBR: One point isn't much in basketball. That seems fluky.

It's not a fluke, and the fact that the game is close is precisely the point. The effect is

present only when the team is just slightly behind. Teams that are leading should be more likely to win for two reasons. One, they tend to be better teams—that's why they're ahead. And two, the losing team simply has to make more points to win. But we've found this interesting insight—that being slightly behind boosts motivation and thus performance. A team in that situation knows it can compete and recognizes it must work harder in the second half to achieve its goal. So it does. After the Women's World Cup soccer final between Japan and the U.S. in July, one commentator noted how odd it was that Japan seemed to play better when they were behind. Our works shows it's not that odd.

NBA players are intensely competitive by nature. It's hardly a random sample.

You're right about that, but I find it compelling that the losing team had something more to give. Why aren't they working

their hardest always? Shouldn't it be impossible to increase the effort and motivation of an elite sample like that? I think it says something about human nature that we still exert a bit more effort when we're slightly behind.

What exactly is “slightly” behind? How do you know where the cutoff point—where motivation doesn't increase—is?

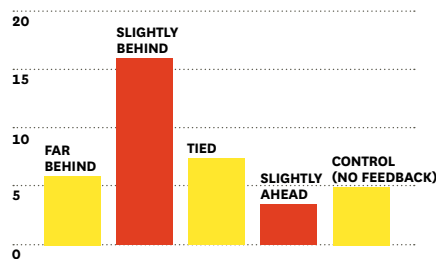
Obviously, context matters. If I'm one sale behind another salesperson but we average only three \$1 million sales a year, then that's not really slightly behind. The person has to truly feel they can overcome the deficit they face.

How do you know this applies to Joe Salesman, who may not be as competitive as a pro basketball player and who isn't competing on physical skill alone?

In one of the lab studies, we measured people's self-efficacy—how confident they felt about their ability to succeed. While

PEOPLE WHO ARE SLIGHTLY BEHIND EXERT MORE EFFORT

How subjects in a typing contest responded, on average, to feedback on how they were doing



Key Number

Winning teams were most likely to make up any deficit they faced in the first seven minutes after halftime, showing that a break for assessment can lead to a surge in effort.



minutes

people who were slightly behind tended to work harder, the effect was strongest among people high in self-efficacy. And I think the effect should be similar for intellectual pursuits, as long as the task is something that effort will help.

Bonus structures typically reward the best performers. Our research shows there are better ways to motivate people.

Your lab games and basketball games used metrics—a number of keystrokes, a score—and included a halftime. Are hard numbers and a break required to generate the effect?

Breaks help. The basketball data show that the slightly behind teams make up most of the deficit right after the halftime break. They come out very strong. Halftime is basically an evaluation time. It helps to have situations where the team can regroup. So if a competition is not as structured as a basketball game, you want to create that break. As for metrics, to the degree you can come up with any sort of numbers, it will help, I suspect. But they're not absolutely required. We still saw the effect by just telling people they were "slightly behind." It can be a subjective metric, such as "He works slightly faster than you," or "His reports come in slightly cleaner."

I see how managers might apply this. I can also see employees' getting sick

and tired of constantly hearing they're slightly behind and just giving up.

I suspect that if you try to do this over and over, the effect will just disappear. But the key insight here is that companies should change their incentive structures. Bonus structures typically reward the best performers. That's great for people close to the top but might even demotivate those who are far behind and know they can't catch up.

Our research shows that there are better ways to motivate people. Competitive feedback along the spectrum should help boost everyone's performance. Evaluations that compare the second best to the best, and the 100th best to the 99th best, and give bonuses based on people's improvement could really increase motivation and effort.

I think you've just described golf handicapping.

Precisely. It's called "flighting."

Where else do you want to take this research?

My collaborator Devin Pope is looking at the effect of round numbers on motivation. What happens if I get an 1190 on my SATs rather than a 1200? One interesting question is, Which is more motivating: fixed metrics or competitive reference points? Will employees work harder if you give them a fixed goal or compare them to another person?

I would put this Defend Your Research slightly behind the best one we've ever done.

Let's take a break, and I'll try harder when we pick it back up. ♡

HBR Reprint F1110D

Words to the Wise

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