



Experienced with individuals at the Board of Directors, “C” Chair, Executive and Senior Management levels, Janet assists executives in adopting effective habits of perception and behavior to lead and accelerate corporate strategies. Typical engagements address executive development in the following areas: articulate and inspire through clarity of vision, enable respectful challenge, debate, and catalyze synergy for strategic business choices, risk/reward critical thinking about investments and shareholder value, plan leader succession and architect sustainable cultural/strategic change.

[Read more about Janet »](#)

“Relationship becomes a high priority the more ambiguous and complex the atmosphere.”

Janet M. Harvey

Many describe today's business environment as highly competitive, and an optimal way to navigate toward success requires that the workforce engages in collaborative teams to produce outcomes faster and better. However, the tension of presence explored in this article as one of the seven common tensions across the globe suggests the desire for Collaboration proves quite challenging to manifest.

Taking a step back and looking in the rearview mirror provides some perspective and some valuable answers. As a successful leader, you have developed habits, preferences, assumptions, and biases to perform, even outperform peers to be successful in life. You construct a reality that supports you to be assertive, and your brain and body build an invisible source of motivation; for the brain, it's a form of energy conservation.

Competing begins at a young age and sustains through the formative years of life, profoundly embedding the impulse to compete in our brains and bodies. Just saying, "Be collaborative," no matter how many benefits that quality produces will not overcome well-worn neural pathways in every person. Biology provides an amplifying effect on the desire to succeed, as can be seen in the definition of Competition. The urge to survive has all living organisms compete for the resources essential to sustain life. Endorsing and encouraging teams and the individuals that comprise those teams to collaborate invites a new approach to action and interaction *without* addressing the overriding survival impulse.

Competition	Collaboration
<i>A circumstance in which two or more parties strive for a goal that is not shared, and for one to win, another must lose. Competition occurs naturally between living organisms that co-exist in the same environment.</i>	<i>Working with someone(s) to create or produce something positive, e.g., John and Julie collaborated on the article, <u>or</u> negative, e.g., Robert collaborated with the enemy and will go to court.</i>

The biological tension mixed with the reality of business complexity and ambiguity generates a thorny problem in and of itself. Observing the behaviors associated with these two qualities emerge in a project or an intact team that gets stuck in between requires leaders to intervene. Let me share a recent example to illustrate this point.

I'm thinking about a technology team of very skilled software engineers facing extreme urgency to upgrade a nationwide network serving 32 million customers. The composition of this global team spanned four of six continents and three languages, and 60% of the group was officially working in an ex-pat status, misaligned with the executive leadership structure, including the lead engineer. To say they were carrying the burden of competing to survive can't be overstated. The lead engineer began witnessing a lot of incivility among the team, and he began to hear unpleasant feedback from peers and superiors across the system: emotional and raised voices in meetings, public name-calling, scapegoating delays, and mistakes, withholding essential information and data from each other, and then productivity slowdowns and absenteeism.

The potential for that 60% to be fired and returned to their home geography was real. He had to do something to support the team and get the project back on track. Team members cognitively understood the stakes, yet, unproductive emotions and behaviors prevailed. They dug into individual survival mode rather than step back and realized that only by working together respectfully and transparently would they restore the project's path to a successful conclusion. Through his coaching experience, the lead engineer learned that the team members only knew each other in their technical resumes. And those technical profiles were fueling Competition. He needed to get some personal relationship-building in place and fast!

Pause a moment and reflect on how you perceive your workplace. Might you be a leader feeling the tension of one or more teams exhibiting destructive behaviors? The tension between Competition and Collaboration has become more acute as most companies simultaneously experience up to five generations in the workplace. The central idea offered here is for leaders to answer this question for themselves: "How do I learn to tolerate the tension that is present and use curiosity and wonder to discover the rest of the story?" There is a line between the two states of being: the tension of presence. Leaders who try to reconcile this tension waste a lot of time. They end up focusing attention and energy on stopping the behaviors rather than seeking valuable solutions that arise using a bit of each quality in a ratio that matches the thorny problem seeking a new, more useful solution.

The diagram below introduces a set of everyday tensions that our research with over 250 enterprise leaders revealed. The presence of tension tolerated for a little bit longer became a way to see how to foster freedom, turning what appeared to be damaging into a resource for perceiving what change to invite and, through that, generate a more desirable state. The shift that can occur builds momentum toward desired Collaboration

with something new by adopting beneficial Competition focused on a shared purpose, identified by building holistic human relationships.



When we put Collaboration and Competition on opposite ends of a line, we recognize that sometimes Competition is healthy. Competition defines an opportunity to be earned and awarded inside companies, e.g., a pitch to get funding for a new initiative that sets up a competition for funding the very best ideas. As the feeling of tension arises to contribute something new and different, that requires bravery to speak up, speak out and step out of the norms. Our best resource is to remember that pause gives more time than it takes. Being deliberate in those moments of pause to prioritize relationships strengthens healthy Competition and collaboration, especially when the business environment or the specific reason for an initiative may be ambiguous and complex.

Three Ideas for the Tension of Presence: Competition and Collaboration

1. **Challenge yourself to bring your full attention.** If you think being on Zoom allows you to multitask, you are sadly mistaken. Turn off the other things that might be causing you to want to drift your attention away, challenge yourself to be in full attention, and cultivate the opportunity to bring all of yourself authentically. You always know it when someone isn't fully available for the conversation; don't be that person and notice how much easier creating respectful relationships becomes for you. From full attention, you short-circuit habits that you see in the rearview mirror, and you can choose to adopt a generative mindset that perceives everyone as whole, resourceful, capable, and creative, much more than their current situation.
2. **Learn to open your listening.** Be in a state of what it was like as kids to be in wonder of the world. I know. As parents, we think, if I hear "why" one more time, I'm going to scream. Yet this is a child finding their and their place in the world. Regardless of age, we all want to discover our place in the world. Quiet your mind and release the need to know the answer. Listen to your teammates without criticism or wanting to make them wrong. Open your mind and listen to what they say without wanting to fix it, advise, or care-take the person. When you're an open listener, you can naturally use curiosity to learn about another. Engage in

conversations for learning to demonstrate respect and genuine interest, inviting others to come into the collaborative discussion. This way of championing curiosity creates a competitive edge because your people are the only source of that. You've chosen the workforce you have on purpose because you saw skills, knowledge and ability, and experienced character traits that you realize are most valuable to create the unique customer experience you want.

3. **Shift conversation from right and wrong.** Instead, notice what works and what's better. Replace right and wrong thinking about Competition as a quality that breeds the bias that there is one standard and there is one expectation that is the one right answer. And anything else is the wrong answer. The world is way too dynamic. It's way too complex and unpredictable, with influences coming very fast as you Collaborate with your team members on what you see in them and what they see in you from a place of honesty. We chose to generate a unifying dialogue that creates a relationship on the premise, "We are in this together." This approach signals deep respect for the other person. Care and the dignity that respect evokes are critical for human beings to experience a sense of belonging, the essential intrinsic motivator to nurture.

If you follow these three practices, you will utterly transform the experience of this tension and learn to invite others to embody a helpful balance between Competition and Collaboration that you confidently trust will be appropriate for any context.