



# Harvard Business Review

www.hbr.org

---

*If left unchecked, this deadly  
sin can sabotage your  
company's performance—and  
your own.*

## Envy at Work

by Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

1 **Article Summary**

Idea in Brief—*the core idea*

3 **Envy at Work**



---

# Envy at Work

## Idea in Brief

Comparing yourself with successful co-workers can be motivating, but it can also trigger envy. The authors' research suggests that such feelings may cause real damage, both to your own career and to your organization's success.

Denying or concealing envy makes the problem worse. To help you manage your feelings, the authors offer mental exercises to bring out your most generous self.

By confronting your feelings and replacing negative habits of thinking with more-productive ones, you will become more open to others, more receptive to change, and more fulfilled at work.



*If left unchecked, this deadly sin can sabotage your company's performance—and your own.*

---

# Envy at Work

by Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson

As you enter your recently promoted colleague's office, you notice a photograph of his beautiful family in their new vacation home. He casually adjusts his custom suit and mentions his upcoming board meeting and speech in Davos. On one hand, you want to feel genuinely happy for him and celebrate his successes. On the other, you hope he falls into a crevasse in the Alps.

Envy—the distress people feel when others get what they want—is universal. Over the past 10 years, we have studied hundreds of executives and their organizations in an effort to discover what role this deadly sin plays in the workplace. We have found that regardless of the economic climate, people at all levels of a firm are vulnerable to envy. However, it intensifies in times of economic crisis. As losses mount, employees worry that they're in jeopardy and grow to resent successful colleagues.

Envy damages relationships, disrupts teams, and undermines organizational performance. Most of all, it harms the one who feels it. When you're obsessed with someone else's suc-

cess, your self-respect suffers, and you may neglect or even sabotage your own performance and possibly your career. Envy is difficult to manage, in part because it's hard to admit that we harbor such a socially unacceptable emotion. Our discomfort causes us to conceal and deny our feelings, and that makes things worse. Repressed envy inevitably resurfaces, stronger than ever.

In the course of our research, we've found that it is possible to prevent yourself from being consumed by envy and even to harness it to your advantage. In this article we'll explain how to recognize potentially destructive thoughts and behaviors; refocus them into more generous, productive ones; and make yourself more open to others, more receptive to change, and more fulfilled at work. We will also offer suggestions for managing envy within your team.

## **A Tale of Two Colleagues**

Envy has sometimes been described as a social microscope. When others' successes in the

workplace bother you, you become ruminative. You obsess over interactions with rivals, compare your rewards, and overanalyze even the fleeting praise the boss bestows on others. Your least-generous self surfaces as you try to boost your fragile ego at your rivals' expense.

Some people become so fixated on a rival that they lose their focus on their own performance. Consider what happened between two colleagues we'll call Scott and Marty, executives in an elite consulting firm, who were regarded as the heart and soul of their team. Initially, they were good friends. They even toasted each other during a business trip, saying that they would "change the world together." They inspired and balanced each other. They were inseparable.

Although Marty was objectively the stronger performer, Scott's personality and social network earned him more attention, opportunities, and recognition both inside and outside the firm. At first, Marty brushed aside his resentment, telling himself that people would inevitably recognize his superiority. However, as Scott's charm catapulted him higher, Marty's envy won out. He undermined Scott in conversations at the watercooler, seethed whenever his rival spoke at meetings, and barely made eye contact with him. Marty grew disengaged from the organization as well, distancing himself from teammates and refusing to mentor younger analysts whom he had readily helped before.

Once considered a superstar, Marty now lacked passion for his work and performed poorly. Senior management was baffled. How could a top performer deteriorate into this negative force? Eventually, Marty lashed out at Scott during a meeting, severing their professional relationship and sabotaging himself in the process. Scott moved forward, but Marty left the firm, feeling vengeful and unable to revive his "love of the game."

### The Damaging Side Effects

This story illustrates two common manifestations of envy: disparagement and distancing. When people have qualities we envy but cannot easily acquire, like beauty or charm, we tend to dismiss the value of those qualities and even treat them with scorn. We make ourselves feel better by belittling the accomplishments of the person we resent, just as Marty put Scott down by saying things like "Well, he

was just lucky," or "He just got the plum assignment because he plays politics." By using such language, Marty also called into question the fairness of the managers who had supported Scott and, by extension, the legitimacy of the organization as a whole.

People also tend to distance themselves from the objects of their envy. Though friendly competitors challenge each other, enviers have difficulty learning from and collaborating with others. That can lead to disruptions or oversights at work. In one technology company we studied, managers who felt threatened by another group's idea simply ignored it. At one investment bank, a senior banker was so envious of a colleague's position and power that instead of talking to the colleague directly, he communicated through a go-between.

Why do we pull away from colleagues we envy? Perhaps because we experience this emotion more intensely with people who are close to us. According to psychologist Abraham Tesser, people are indeed unhappier when a close friend succeeds in a personally relevant domain than when a stranger does. Strangers are an abstraction, and their achievements are merely statistics. The successes of your close friends are vivid and seem attainable to you, too. Paul McCartney once described the psychological barriers undermining the Beatles' collaboration this way: "I would bring in a song and you could sort of see John [Lennon] stiffen a bit. Next day, he'd bring in a song and I'd sort of stiffen. And it was like, 'Oh, you're going to do that, are you?'"

The desire to remain at arm's length from successful colleagues leads to missed opportunities and organizational inefficiency. Our research shows that people want to learn more about ideas that come from other companies than about ideas that originate with rivals in their own organizations. In one study, we asked managers from various industries to develop innovation strategies for a restaurant chain. We next had them look at two identical sets of restaurant design innovations. One group was told that the designs came from outsiders, and another that they came from people in their own companies. We then asked the managers to rate their willingness to use the ideas and to specify what portion of a \$10,000 budget they'd allocate to acquiring information about the innovations. The participants who believed the innovations came from exter-

---

**Tanya Menon** (tanyamenon.research@gmail.com) is an associate professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

**Leigh Thompson** (leighthompson@kellogg.northwestern.edu) is the J. Jay Gerber Professor of Dispute Resolution and Organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

nal rivals were more willing to use them and allocated \$2,470, on average, to learning about them, whereas the group that believed the ideas came from internal rivals allocated \$1,740.

What caused these differences? Concerns about status. When we copy an idea from an outsider, we're seen as enterprising; when we borrow an idea from a colleague, we mark that person as an intellectual leader. We asked the managers to estimate how likely they were to lose status by adopting the design ideas, on a scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (very likely). The managers who believed the ideas were internal thought they were 36% more likely to lose status than managers who believed the ideas were external.

This dislike of learning from inside rivals has a high organizational price. Employees instead pursue external ideas that cost more both in time (which is often spent reinventing the wheel) and in money (if they hire consultants).

We saw these patterns at play at Fresh Choice, a West Coast salad-buffet chain, in research we conducted with Stanford Business School professor Jeffrey Pfeffer. Fresh Choice managers initially coveted the inventive menus and lively decor and atmosphere of a competitor chain, Zoopa. After Fresh Choice acquired Zoopa, the Fresh Choice managers felt threatened by their Zoopa peers and began to criticize them. The former Zoopa managers—once referred to as “bright,” “creative,” and “energetic”—now seemed to the insiders to be “burnt out” and “sloppy.” Fresh Choice managers actively resisted learning from the very people they had once admired from afar. Most of the Zoopa managers eventually left the company, taking their intellectual capital with them.

### Stopping the Downward Spiral

Although the German word *schadenfreude*—delighting in others' misery—rapidly entered the English lexicon, the term *mudita* (from Pali, an ancient language of India), used by Buddhists to mean “rejoicing in the good fortune of others,” has not. It is the rare person whose automatic impulse is to feel glad when meeting someone smarter, prettier, or richer. Nevertheless, it is possible to cultivate more generosity of spirit and quiet the cruel voice of envy. To lay the groundwork for *mudita*, we suggest a few simple techniques, which we've

found help people replace their envy with more-productive habits of mind.

**Pinpoint what makes you envious.** Your envy reflex can be a useful source of information. Think of it as data on what you value.

The key is to recognize the circumstances and qualities in others that trigger your envy. Ask yourself if your feelings reveal what you are most insecure about lacking. For example, do you envy people who learn new skills more quickly, earn higher salaries, or get praise from the boss? When you accurately identify the things that set you off, you can begin to tame envious feelings before they turn into counter-productive responses. You can also focus on improving yourself in the areas you've discov-

## Self-Assessment: Are You Falling into the Envy Trap?

In our research, we use the following exercise to help people recognize patterns of thought that lead to negative thinking:

Think about a person in your organization who is at a similar level and with whom you often compare yourself. Think about one of this person's recent accomplishments. Describe it. Then answer the questions below.

**1. Did you congratulate this person?**

Yes (0), No (1)

**2. How did the news of his or her achievement make you feel?** Happy (0), Neutral (1), Vaguely disturbed (2)

**3. Did you worry that superiors might devalue your own achievements as a result?** Yes (1), No (0)

**4. When was the last time you gave public credit or kudos to this person?**

Last time he or she had a success (0), Don't remember (1), Never (2)

**5. Do you sometimes catch yourself obsessing over how much status this person has?** Yes (1), No (0)

**6. Imagine that this person suffers an embarrassing public failure or professional loss. Does this make you feel sad, indifferent, or happy?** Sad (0), Indifferent (1), Happy (2)

**7. I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake.** False (0), True (1)

**8. I have never intensely disliked anyone.** False (0), True (1)

**9. I sometimes feel resentful when I don't get my way.** True (0), False (1)

**What the Scores Reveal**

First, tabulate your scores for questions 1–6.

**7–9** Congratulations on having the self-awareness to admit your envy!

**4–6** You have moderate envy.

**2–3** You have low envy.

**0–1** You have reached *mudita* (joy for others' good fortune)! Or you are in denial.

**To help differentiate *mudita* from denial, now tabulate your scores for questions 7–9.**

These questions come from the Crowne-Marlowe social desirability scale, which measures your tendency to convey a self-image that conforms to social expectations.

**2–3** You might want to think deeply about whether your responses on this survey accurately reflect your behavior.

**0–1** You're comfortable admitting to behaviors that don't conform to social ideals, and a low score on items 1–6 is likely to truly indicate that you are managing your envy effectively.

*Why do we pull away from colleagues we envy? Perhaps because we experience this emotion more intensely with people who are close to us.*

ered you care about most. (For some helpful questions, see the sidebar “Self-Assessment: Are You Falling into the Envy Trap?”)

**Don't focus on other people; focus on yourself.** Comparing yourself with others is natural and can be motivational. However, too much of it leads to envy, especially if you're ungenerous toward yourself. Instead, try measuring your present self against your past self. When we asked Marty to map his sales performance, he was amazed to see that he had achieved a 5% to 10% annual increase in sales while at his firm. This made him feel more self-confident and took the edge off his resentment of Scott.

**Affirm yourself.** Though recognizing your emotional triggers and your own accomplishments can help you check envy, you still might not rejoice in others' successes. If you feel threatened every time a perceived rival does well, you can squelch your knee-jerk resentment by doing one simple thing: reminding yourself of your own strengths and successes. In one experiment we asked people to think about a rival and prepare for a task in which they would evaluate that person's latest idea. Before the task, half the participants listed some of their own accomplishments (“I'm a good tennis player”) or cherished values (“I put my family first”). The other half did not.

This simple exercise yielded profound results. When we asked the participants what percentage of their working hours they'd be willing to devote to learning about their rival's plan, we found that managers who had affirmed themselves were willing to allocate about 60% more time than those who had not affirmed themselves. Imagine that translated into just 10 minutes more a day. If you multiplied it by 20 people in a department over the course of a year, the impact could be huge.

### **How to Manage Envy on Your Team**

As we have seen, envy exacts a toll on organizations, beginning with the person who envies. Marty became so obsessed with Scott's results that he stopped focusing on his own performance. Envy also affects the envied, who face potential sabotage; although Marty's griping behind Scott's back seemed harmless, it could have undermined Scott's projects, reputation, and career, especially if others shared Marty's feelings. Envy also spreads negativity throughout the organization.

As a manager, you may have to deal with

envy directed not only at your top people but at yourself. You can't control it by denying promotions to your best team members or, for that matter, turning down rewards for your own performance. Instead, acknowledge that recognition and rewards will inevitably generate envy, and then implement the following techniques to circumvent and manage it.

**Share power.** Managers who share the glory with subordinates and promote others help both their teams and themselves. One senior Unilever executive we studied always rewarded her successful subordinates with responsibility and credit. She earned a reputation for developing exceptionally motivated future leaders and created allies in the process. She was promoted—precisely because she built up others.

**Make what is scarce plentiful.** Often, people on teams throw sharp elbows as they compete for resources they perceive to be limited. While some resources are certainly finite (such as budgets), you can enlarge other kinds more readily. For instance, one manager we studied noticed that his team constantly engaged in one-upmanship at meetings in attempts to win scarce airtime with him. Although meeting times were fixed, his personal time was flexible. Therefore, he guaranteed every team member an hour of one-on-one time with him each week, which resulted in more-collaborative meetings.

Sharing resources with other teams will also help tamp down envy in your organization. Managers often believe they can guarantee their survival by hoarding resources, but in reality, they only isolate themselves and lose allies, and may even set in motion their own demise. Sharing resources, in contrast, lays the groundwork for reciprocity and future collaboration.

**Give enviers and their targets different spheres of influence.** Enabling enviers to mentally separate their roles and carve out separate domains can curtail invidious comparisons. For instance, Scott recently contacted Marty about rejoining the firm. During the conversation, Marty's resentments resurfaced. We coached Marty to construct a situation that would not invite direct comparisons between the two men. He suggested that he lead the firm's up-and-comers and Scott manage subordinates who needed more coaching. With the tasks clearly differentiated, Marty

felt ready to confront the challenge and agreed to rejoin the firm. The new arrangement has worked well: It allows the two men to learn from each other, but their work isn't directly comparable, and they can't be evaluated using the same metrics.

**Beware of linguistic triggers.** Managers unintentionally breed envy by signaling, through subtle cues, that they appreciate certain types of traits and successes more than others that may be less attention-getting but just as valuable to the organization. So be especially careful about your use of language. For instance, too much public praise for a team member's "leadership" can make it seem as if you overlook the importance of collaborative followers. (In one college that celebrated the culture of leadership, undergraduates frequently founded clubs just so that they could become "president." Lacking incentives for "followership," these clubs struggled to find members and rarely accomplished much.)

Similarly, a word such as "innovation" sets people up to play the comparison game. Instead of singling out innovators, encourage collaborative practices and reward creative thievery. Thomas Edison celebrated the creativity needed to apply, modify, and improve ideas, noting that he simply gave "commercial value to the brilliant, but misdirected, ideas of others" and that he himself was "more of a sponge

than an inventor." At one time BP, in addition to rewarding innovators, conferred a "thief of the year" award, honoring employees who recognized and borrowed internal colleagues' innovations.

The economic crisis has prompted people to question their own market value with more urgency and fear. The barrage of news about compensation inequalities reminds us that others enjoy huge rewards that we don't. Social networking sites tell us when our work contacts get promotions and are enjoying better vacations than our own. Anxiety about our own performance underscores our insecurities. These and other forces have recently collided to produce a perfect storm of organizational envy.

Although envy is natural and automatic, our research has shown that it is controllable. By reflecting on your vulnerable moments and practicing new habits, you can turn an undignified and harmful emotion into a means of improving both your own performance and your team's.

---

Reprint R1004F

To order, see the next page  
or call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500  
or go to [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org)





---

**To Order**

For *Harvard Business Review* reprints and subscriptions, call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500. Go to [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org)

For customized and quantity orders of *Harvard Business Review* article reprints, call 617-783-7626, or e-mail [customizations@hbsp.harvard.edu](mailto:customizations@hbsp.harvard.edu)



**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

[www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org)

U.S. and Canada  
800-988-0886  
617-783-7500  
617-783-7555 fax