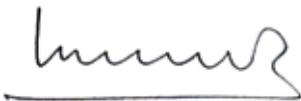


# Comparisons Are Still Odious



**JOAN DE DOU**

Senior lecturer of the department of managing people in organizations, IESE

“**W**here are you working now?” This is a very common question when two people who know each other get back in touch after time apart, such as might happen to IESE alumni. But the answers can vary, depending on who is asking the question. The person on the receiving end of this question may give an evasive answer – after making a quick comparison – if they feel their professional position could be considered “inferior” to the other person’s, but it’s a different story if they feel they have a more prestigious position.

In his book *Happiness*, **Richard Layard** – economist, professor emeritus at the London School of Economics and a member of the British House of Lords – argues that the two root causes of a person’s unhappiness are often complacency (not knowing how to enjoy what one has) and comparisons. But what does it mean to make comparisons? How does it affect us?

There are many studies that validate the expression “in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” What would you prefer: to earn \$100,000 in a social milieu in which your “equals” earn \$120,000? Or earn \$80,000 in a setting in which everyone else earns \$70,000? The answer tends to be \$80,000.

The conclusion is a simple one: the actions of those who check the \$80,000 box are influenced by their peers. And when people are overly concerned with comparing themselves with those around them, it can have extremely negative consequences for them as individuals and, therefore, on their personal and professional lives as well.

In order to get the complete picture, two factors need to be considered: firstly, the context

in which a person finds him- or herself is ever-changing, and secondly, each person’s perception of it will vary. As such, decisions driven by comparisons are often amiss.

Let’s turn to the corporate realm. An employee observes coworkers who belong to the same professional group, and compares him or herself to those coworkers. One, for instance, seems to be very in tune with their superior. Another performs better thanks to a more aggressive personality. The first employee might react by trying to imitate his or her peers, but does not possess the requisite qualities of empathy or pushiness. This person is therefore incapable of controlling the influence that comparison with their environment has on them personally, on their behavior and on their professional output.

At the source of comparison lies a lack of assuredness in oneself. An insecure person will depend on the opinion of others to gain a feeling of happiness, however superficial and fleeting, since it is purely based on remarks, such as from a coworker or a superior. In the business world, everyone must be aware of the role they should play and what their capabilities are.

It may be obvious to some, but in order to start solving the problem it must be accepted that people tend to compare themselves with others and that this attitude affects them in many ways. Many people are not aware of this, and thus live enslaved and inhibited by their insecurities, because there will always be someone seemingly better or more fortunate.

And, of course, it’s essential to have solid convictions upon which we can build our sense of security – this should form our personal measuring stick. Using someone else’s only creates a constant sense of frustration.