



American Expression E2544 Catfish effect

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The “catfish effect” is a concept that describes how introducing a strong or competitive individual into a group can stimulate others to perform better. The term originates from a story in the fishing industry, where Norwegian sardine fishermen discovered that adding a catfish to a tank of sardines kept the sardines active and alive during transport. Without the catfish, the sardines would become lethargic and die. Metaphorically, the “catfish effect” reflects how competition or challenge can bring out the best in people, preventing stagnation and promoting growth.

In workplaces, the catfish effect is often seen when a new, highly capable employee joins a team. Their presence creates a sense of urgency and motivation among existing members, encouraging everyone to improve their skills and productivity. This effect can revitalize an organization that has become complacent, sparking innovation and renewed enthusiasm. It demonstrates that a certain level of healthy competition can lead to collective advancement rather than conflict when managed properly.

Psychologically, the catfish effect taps into intrinsic human tendencies toward self-improvement and recognition. When individuals see a peer excelling, it triggers both admiration and a desire to match that level of achievement. Rather than seeing the new comer as a threat, people can use the comparison as motivation to enhance their own performance. In this sense, the catfish effect aligns with social learning theory—humans learn and evolve by observing and responding to others’ actions.

However, the effect has its limits. If competition becomes too intense or poorly managed, it can lead to stress, resentment, or burnout. Team members may feel overshadowed or undervalued, especially if leadership fails to foster collaboration alongside competition. Therefore, organizations must strike a balance—encouraging improvement while maintaining a supportive and respectful environment. The catfish should energize the group, not consume it.

The concept also applies beyond business. In education, sports, and personal relationships, the presence of a high achiever can inspire others to stretch their limits. Students often perform better when surrounded by motivated peers, and athletes push harder when competing against stronger opponents. The catfish effect thus underscores the importance of challenge and diversity in human development.

On a personal level, embracing the catfish effect means welcoming situations that push us outside our comfort zones. It reminds individuals that growth often arises from discomfort. By surrounding themselves with people who challenge their thinking or outperform them, they can accelerate their own progress and adaptability.

In conclusion, the catfish effect illustrates that a touch of competition can awaken potential and drive excellence. Whether in business, education, or personal life, the key lies in transforming challenge into inspiration. When balanced with cooperation and respect, the catfish effect becomes a catalyst for progress rather than conflict—a reminder that energy and innovation thrive when we are stirred, not still.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the Catfish Effect explain the way competition can motivate people to perform better?
2. Can the Catfish Effect ever create too much stress or unhealthy rivalry in workplaces or schools?
3. What are some real-life examples where the presence of a strong competitor improved overall performance?
4. How can leaders or managers use the Catfish Effect positively without causing tension among team members?
5. In what situations might the Catfish Effect fail to produce positive results, and why?