

Leaderboards have been a staple of gaming and gamification for as long as both have existed. From Space Invaders, to baseball, to your gamified CRM system - all have had leaderboards in there somewhere.

The reasoning goes “if you are the top, you feel special and if you are at the bottom, you don’t want to be there so are motivated to improve”.

It sounds great, doesn’t it? Instant [engagement](#). DO well, feel special. Do badly, be motivated to do better. In some cases, this is can be the case. In sports, it is a way of knowing where a team is in the league and how many points they need to improve by. In space invaders it was a way to create a more social or even personal challenge in the game, helping to create that “one more go” feeling. If I have one more go, I know I can be better than AAA or myself.

Both of those examples have one thing in common - competition.

People often cite the reason to use leaderboards in gamification is the example of sales teams. Sales teams have used leaderboards for decades to create a level of competition. In an environment where every sale goes towards you being financially better off, this does make some sense. You need to know how many sales you need to beat the guy who is going to get the bonus if you don’t! There is no need for collaboration, ever man for himself is the rule.

## It’s a Long Way Down

But not all environments are competitive. Take, for example, a company that wants to increase its social media usage. They could create a leaderboard that tracks the activity of each individual. This is then shown to all employees each week, highlighting those doing best against those doing not so well. If that is all you have, what happens is that you create a “them and us” split. Those who are doing well and those who are not.

If people in the “are not” category are particularly competitive - this may spur them on. However, that will not be the majority in most companies. In reality, many of those who are at the bottom or outside of the top ten will just disengage. The thought of “how can I ever achieve that, I may as well just give up” will overrule any competitive nature. This is especially true if the rules are too opaque.

Some of this can be alleviated by using the leaderboard as a way for people to learn. If everyone understands the rules, then everyone has an equal chance of winning. If you utilise

the top players as instructors for the rest, then you can also drive people. It is no longer us and them, it is a collaboration to bring everyone up - but there can still only be one winner.

## It's Lonely at the Top

But what if you are at the top? Surely that must be awesome. Well... not so much.

I have spent a lot of time at the top of the Gamification Gurus Power 100 leaderboard. At first, it was awesome. It was a great social tool as it got me industry and peer recognition. People could find me if they needed questions answered about a topic I loved. More importantly, I could see who was in the industry and was able to expand my network. But things started to turn when I realised just how hard it is to stay at the top and the pressure there is to maintain it. What was a fun background activity, became an ever-present need to stay at the top. I knew most of the rules, so knew what I had to do to maintain my position. Even when the rules changed, I discovered what had happened and could adjust accordingly. However, this came at a price. I was creating a huge quantity of social activity, but the quality was dropping constantly. One of the key metrics became SlideShare views and downloads. I didn't use SlideShare that much, so had to start. I uploaded anything I had in powerpoint - just to get views. I tweeted random things that related to gamification just to get the hashtag usage up.

More insidiously, I would not share other experts content on twitter - for fear of them getting points instead of me!

It was no longer fun. If I dropped out of the top 5, I began to panic. This was made worse by the fact that the industry award from Gamification World Congress had always been linked to the Guru Leaderboard. You had to be in a good spot for a long period of time to get nominated - before the voting even began.

As of today, I currently sit around 8th place on the board. I decided to take a break. I had won the award for Industry Contribution. It was no longer linked to the leaderboard, so taking the pressure off myself seemed sensible.

One of the big problems with this type of leaderboard, is how long it has been running. Years. Not weeks or months, but years. That may not be a bad thing when it comes to league tables, but when it creates one on one competition where collaboration might be better, it is destructive.

## Tips if you are Using a Leaderboard

If you are going to use leaderboards, here are a few tips

- Make the rules as transparent as possible. People have to know how to win and be able to learn what went right or wrong.
  - Don't run it for any longer than you need.
  - Don't use one if you are looking for collaboration.
  - Decide on a sensible length of time between updates. it doesn't need to be real-time always. Sometimes that just becomes an unnecessary distraction.
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