Gameplaying in Corporate

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Ever hear talk in the workplace about someone or other being engaged in "playing games"? Well, maybe that someone is smarter than we think because using a game analogy to think about almost everything you do has the potential to make life in all its aspects lot more rewarding, interesting and fun.

Whether it is soccer, chess, baseball, your relationships, religion, the economy, tertiary education or any other aspect of human endeavour, the basic principles of game apply. Might your attitudes and behaviours towards your key relationships change if you experienced their underlying game nature? Might you feel a little more light-hearted and creative? Would that be useful?

In the context of corporate, many seem to think that game playing is something done outside of working space and working hours. Work is work and fun is fun and never the 'twain shall meet. People often even talk about their work as being 'serious' and their leisure activities as being 'fun'. But true game players have uncovered the secret of having fun *and* getting the results they want by simply understanding the game and applying principles of game theory to everything they do.

The way in which you think and talk about your experiences not only describes but makes those experiences 'real' for you and others. Understanding that game structure underlies all human experience is both helpful and empowering – those who see it as 'real life' tend to have a serious approach that is not particularly helpful in the creative process. And serious thinking might also set them up for the anxiety and worry that are precursors to stress-related disorders.

A game is defined as a learned cultural sequence characterised by Rules, Roles, Goals, Rituals, Language, Values and Style.

- ● **Rules** – In order to play a game well, you need to be clear about what the rules are – both written and unwritten – and work with them stretching the boundaries where possible. Rules stipulate what can and cannot be done and not playing by the rules means you risk penalty or even exclusion from the game. Can the rules be bent or questioned? Are the rules applied consistently? Are the rules of the game stifling innovation and creativity? Is everyone clear about what the rules are?
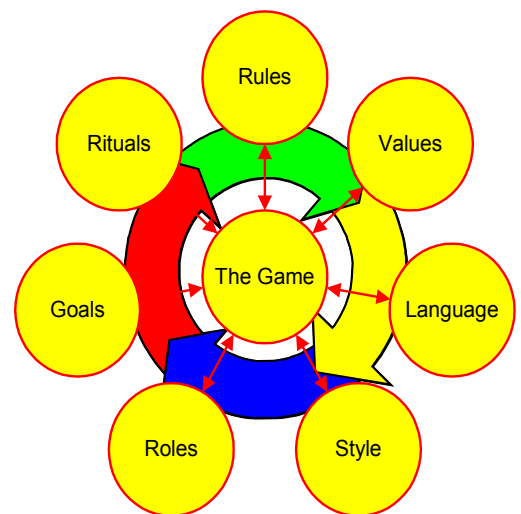
● **Roles** – Every human being plays a number of different roles in day-to-day life. In addition to the kinship roles (you are someone's child, lover, brother/sister, father/mother etc..) you probably play many different roles in the workplace as well. Think of the roles of friend, confidante, coach, mentor, boss, subordinate or even petty tyrant that you play within the context of your job title. Are the roles clear for you? Are there better ways to perform these roles? Are you expending the appropriate amount of energy in these roles? How would you know if you were performing your role exceptionally well or badly? Who gives you feedback? Some organisational theorists have suggested that organisational job titles are the same as roles performed by actors on the stage. The difference is that you interpret, direct, script and perform the role yourself. The challenge then is to perform the role as best as you can without attachment to it - be open to new experience by changing and evolving your performance.

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● **Rituals** – A ritual refers to Speech, action, singing, and other activities which often contain a symbolic meaning, performed in a specific order. In organisations, audits, year-end functions and weekly meetings are examples of typical rituals. One of the characteristics of rituals is that they can be performed so regularly that they start to lose their meaning and many people 'go through the motions' without quite understanding what they are really doing and why. Be clear about the rituals you engage in and their outcomes. Are they really necessary? Could they be changed, simplified or even removed? What relationships exist between rituals and outcomes?

● **Language –** each game has its own language which allows participants to share and even create a common experience. The game of Law, for example, requires that many years be spent at university and doing articles. During this period, the budding lawyer will come to know a language that not only allows the experience of law, but it also acts as an effective 'barrier to entry' to non-lawyers. But lawyers are not the only ones with a unique language – every field of human endeavour has its language, set of symbols, metaphors and figures of speech that are continuously repeated. What language do you engage in? Is it the language of creativity, opportunity, teamwork and success? Could you appropriate language from other areas to expand your experience and describe your world?

● **Values** – Values are are standards or qualities considered worthwhile or desirable. They are abstract ideas about what an organisation/ society/ community believes to be good, right, and desirable. They represent deeply held beliefs demonstrated through day-to-day behaviours and are the fundamental principles that guide community-driven processes and define how organisational players aspire to interact. They provide a basis for action and communicate expectations for participation and make a public pronouncement about how the organisation expects everyone to behave. Values should endure over the long-term and provide a constant source of strength for the individual or organisation that holds them.

It has been suggested by a number of writers that values and attitudes create conditions that make certain beliefs and behaviours more likely. It is important to understand that whilst these values are influenced by the culture from which you come, you are ultimately responsible for constructing your own values. So spending time on your values is an important exercise which becomes more useful as you read over and update them from time to time. What values do you need to support in order to play a particular game? Are these values reinforced and

expressed in both your language and behaviour? Is there a discrepancy between expressed values and behaviour? How do you come to know what values are required to successfully play the games you are engaged in?

- **Goals** – It should be underlined that while the attitudes of gameplaying should always be lighthearted, often the outcomes of games such as M&A, restructuring, rightsizing and day trading can be deadly serious. Every game has a goal, even if the goal is to simply continue playing the game in a sustainable manner or to win. While soccer, rugby and cricket matches come to an end with winners and losers, the game continues – season after season. Goals a particular game of business might include sustainable profits, the creation of wealth and having rewarding interpersonal relationships. What are your personal goals? What are the goals of the game that you are playing? Do they contradict each other? Are the goals worth the effort? How have you reached clarity and agreement with your fellow players about what the goals and nature of the game are?

> **"Human beings are by nature actors, who cannot become something until they have pretended to be it. They are therefore to be divided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane, who know they are acting, and the mad who don't"**
> **WH Auden**

- **Style** – Style is the way you play the game. Style embodies your behaviours, thoughts and words. Irrespective of what you are playing, you bring your unique personal style to the game. Style is learned and developed over time and is strongly influenced by role models, self perception and particularly by feedback. Much as sportsmen view videos of their performance in order to improve themselves, feedback allows you to see which behaviours provide the desirable outcomes. Where do you get your feedback from and is it helping you to achieve the desired results? Are you flexible enough to question your own style, open enough to ask for feedback and creative enough to experiment with new styles? Are you aware that much of your style is influenced by your early childhood experiences and from observing how others respond to situations?

Seeing the game nature of human activity is empowering in that it allows you to be lighthearted and playful – traits often associated with creativity. By contrast, not understanding the game is a sure recipe for confusion and helplessness. The experienced and effective game player knows that it is possible to change positions while deeply embedded within the game without losing face.

Using a game metaphor in all aspects of your life ensures a light-hearted, open and humorous approach to situations that others (who don't understand the idea of game playing) might take seriously and as 'real life'. In other words, conceptualising human activity as a game is an empowering and a strategic tool that helps you get what it is you want.

Ideas & Experiments

- Try and see whatever you do as a game. How could the games you play become more interesting, rewarding and FUN?
- Try to name the games around you – these could 'big games' like the economy, science, love, poverty, culture, politics, medicine, parenting and war.
- Remember the root of the words Delusion (*Deludo* – Latin for 'Outside of the game') and Illusion (*Inludo* – Latin for 'In the game'). Are there some games you want to enter? Are there some you wish to leave? What do you have to sacrifice in order to play? Can you be flexible enough to play in different ways? Who is inviting you to play?

- What are you perceiving? How do others see it? Remember that 'seeing' a particular game is a product of your perception and creative ability. Your leadership ability is about seeing a new, empowering game and somehow influencing others to see and experience it in the same way you do.
- Deconstruct your key relationships in terms of a game. What are the Rules, Roles, Goals, Rituals, Language, Values and Styles required to play the game really well? How confident are you about your gameplaying?
- Where do you get feedback from that tells you how well (or badly) you are perceived to be playing the game? How open are you to feedback – particularly negative feedback? What adjustments can you make to ensure that you become even more proficient?
- Engage the language and metaphor of play and experimentation in whatever you do. Some languages engage this concept in interesting ways - in high forms of Japanese, for example, every verb is preceded by saying 'played at'. For example, I play at being the MD, I play at being an artist, I play at being a coach and I play at being a father and even my father is playing at being dead. Somehow the word play is a reminder that you are still learning, experimenting and growing in a light-hearted, open way. Remember, it isn't just life and death, it is a game. Enjoy it!
- Be clear about what games you are engaged in, how much energy you expend in playing, what results you expect and why you are doing it.
- Develop leadership intent around a game – how would you like to see the game in the future? What needs to change to attain the positive outcomes?

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