

GAMES AT WORK

HOW TO RECOGNIZE & REDUCE OFFICE POLITICS

Mauricio Goldstein

Philip Read

Foreword by Kevin Cashman

Korn/Ferry International



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Praise for *Games at Work*

“What types of counterproductive games can you find in your organization? You are probably not aware of many of them, nor aware of the harmful long-term effects they produce. Reading *Games at Work* will increase your consciousness of the games played in the organizational arena and give you tips on how to neutralize them. An entertaining and insightful read.”

—**Ney Simone Silva**, head of human resources, Camargo Corrêa—Engineering & Construction

“Goldstein and Read have identified a very important and overlooked area within organizations. Their analysis underlines how organizational games can undermine performance at both a personal and organizational level. Vigilance is needed if high performance is to be achieved.”

—**Norman Walker**, senior advisor, TPG

“Outstanding way to describe in simple words and with a good sense of humor the real dynamics of corporate life. *Games at Work* is a must-read for newcomers and experienced people in global business who want to understand better how to identify and ‘play’ these unavoidable corporate games!”

—**Mauricio M. Adade**, president, DSM Nutritional Products, Human Nutrition and Health

“Deep insights into not only the corridors and meeting rooms but also the ‘minds’ of organizations! A must-read for everyone who wants to be aware of games played in big organizations but not necessarily abide by their rules.”

—**Tarek Rabah**, marketing company president, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, Gulf region

“An entertaining and practical tool kit for recognizing and correcting dysfunctional behavior in the workplace. With their vast experience working in many countries around the world and grounded in their rigorous research, Goldstein and Read serve as cultural anthropologists in credibly describing the games that the reader may never have noticed before and now recognize as true. This book is a must-read for all who are committed to improving the communications and culture of their organizations.”

—**Tom Gross**, founder and managing partner, Genesis Consulting Group

“*Games at Work* will help you recognize and reduce the unproductive games employees play in your organization.”

—**Eric Poll**, founder, OrgInt—Organisational Intelligence; former corporate vice president of human resources, Leica Geosystems

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*For Larissa, Yoram, and Benny
For Diane, Danny, and Natasha*

FOREWORD

Games at Work can change your life—personally and organizationally. As leaders, it is crucial to discern the art of gamesmanship from the art of leadership. If we are equipped to do so, authenticity and sustainable results will be ours; if we don't, the results will be devastating for ourselves, our teams, and our organizations. Understanding when we are leading with character, serving all constituencies, and when we are leading by coping, mainly serving ourselves and our personal ambitions, is the essential key to moving from self-focused to service-focused leadership. **Games serve ourselves; authentic leadership serves others.**

Games at Work gives us the tools to become aware of the games we all play. Why is this so important? Because without awareness of limiting behaviors, we cannot rise above them. While effective leaders elevate others to go beyond what is, we first must become aware of what is holding us back. Read and Goldstein give us the multi-dimensional resources to elevate our organizations to go beyond gamesmanship to authentic, value-creating leadership.

A while ago, I was advising a senior team in the midst of a major crisis. The COO had made a huge, visible operational error that the media was loudly clamoring about, and the analysts were heavily punishing the stock. In response, the COO put on his “game face.” In an attempt to alleviate his fear of organizational and personal failure, his “let’s look good” game kicked in. Presenting to the senior team, he painted a brilliant picture of the situation with impressive flair and analysis. He even identified a clear way out of the

situation. The senior team was attentive and intrigued by the solution. You could hear a pin drop. There was just one problem—what he was saying was not true! Yes, it was a way out and, yes, it was tempting to the team, but no one said a word. Fortunately, the CEO stood up and with game-piercing directness said, “Bill, do you want to look good or do you want to make a difference?” Game over. In its place, a new pattern of behavior had been chosen: a choice for authentic conversations. The team mobilized around coming clean with the analysts and market about what happened and how they would not repeat their mistakes. The short-term result: the stock dropped even more and more courage was needed to stay out of spin games. The long-term result: the stock recovered and the company was repositioned for sustainable success. Trust and credibility were restored. The first step beyond organizational games had been taken.

If games in organizational life are so damaging, then why do they persist? Because they work. In the short term, people, teams, and organizations get what they want through games. However, in the long run, the cumulative effect of games can be devastating. Reducing games is directly proportional to improving organizational climate and increasing organization results. A leader who reduces his or her games becomes more authentic. A team that reduces games becomes more trusting and connected. An organization that reduces games becomes more believable, meaningful, attractive, creative, and productive.

Games at Work can literally transform individual, team, and organizational culture by reducing the life-draining aspects of games. Where do games come from? Why do they come up in the first place? Fear is the fuel of games. We unknowingly fill up the gas tank of game playing when we want something and are afraid we might not get it. Games are a way to cope with our stress in a reactive way to attempt to get what we want. Games are short cuts that

don't get us to our long-term destination; games are a kind of labyrinth with no end.

Fortunately, there are effective ways to transcend games: courage, character, and constants, to name a few. Having the courage to express the right thing, the character to do the right thing, and the constants (values/principles) to know the right thing are the prerequisites to go from gamesmanship to true leadership. This is NO easy task. *Games at Work* is so important to organizational leadership because it gives you the understanding and techniques to actually accelerate these transforming practices in your organization.

Since games are inherently self-focused, they can have huge ethical downsides. As author John Dalla Costa in his work on ethics puts it, "Ethics in others." When John first shared this concept with me a few years ago, I thought it a bit simplistic, but as I went deeper into his core insight, I realized its profound simplicity. Leadership is the journey from self to service . . . the journey from coping to character . . . the journey from games to giving. When we are focused on authentic giving and service to others, games are perceived as superficial and self-promoting, both in ourselves and in our organization. Games are literally transformed through the alchemy of service and stewardship into a higher, more valuable mission or purpose. Moving our organizations from games to purpose is the real work of leadership.

Another dynamic that can transform games is awareness. We engage in games because we lack either an internal awareness of our fear or an external awareness of its impact on others. Engaging in games means our emotional intelligence is low. As Daniel Goleman, and others, has taught us, emotional intelligence is a heightened awareness of self and a heightened awareness of others, as well as the

dynamic between the two. Emotional Intelligence reduces game playing and increases authentic human interaction. As Read and Goldstein so lucidly teach us, games must be significantly reduced to create organizations that are healthy organisms. If you put *Games at Work* into practice, you will increase the emotional intelligence and reduce the game playing in your organization.

Read and Goldstein have made a great contribution to organizational life with *Games at Work*. Imagine an organization with its energy fully harnessed onto leadership contribution, not diffused and distracted with gamesmanship. Imagine an organization focused on purpose, passionate about service, connected in relationship, and producing sustainable results. This is the world of work that *Games at Work* inspires us to create together.

February 2009
Kevin Cashman
Senior Partner
Korn/Ferry Leadership
& Talent Consulting

Introduction

In any organizational environment, people play games. This is true of even the most enlightened companies. It is in our nature as human beings to play games when we are in groups, when stress and anxiety exist, and when “prizes” (promotions, the boss’s favor, funding for a project, winning a contract, and so on) are to be won and lost. It doesn’t matter what size your company is or how it’s structured. Although some cultures promote games more than others, just about every company possesses a game ecology—a pattern of games that form over time and that thrive in a particular environment.

Games take many forms and vary widely in their complexity. How people respond to them varies too: games can be positively reinforced, actively participated in, or minimized. Our purpose in writing this book is not to try to *eliminate* games. This is an impossible and, in a sense, inhuman task, akin to trying to stop employees from day-dreaming. Instead, our intention is first to describe what we have learned about both the damage games cause and the benefits of reducing games, and second to share practical ideas for reducing them.

This isn’t a theoretical study of game playing or a psychological treatise on the deeper needs being met by engaging in these activities. Instead, it is a practical guide to the world of organizational games, providing examples and analysis of the most common games played within teams and other groups as well as advice about the best ways to manage these games.

Before we explain how we became interested in this topic, we’d like to give you a sense of what a game looks like

within an organizational context.

The Marginalize Game

Brendan was a twenty-seven-year-old whiz kid who worked at a top consulting firm. A Harvard MBA, Brendan was seen as someone who might become a future star. As a result, he was given a number of choice assignments early on, including membership on a new team that had been formed to analyze future growth possibilities for the firm. Brendan was the most junior member of the team by at least five years.

The Marginalize game was part of the firm's culture. Marginalizing was originally directed at poor performers, a none-too-subtle message that they weren't cutting it. Over time, though, it evolved and became a game used to isolate anyone who went against the group, who represented a threat from a job standpoint, or who made others uncomfortable because of his or her style or ideas.

Brendan represented a threat, so he was consistently marginalized by his colleagues and even by some of the younger partners. It wasn't that Brendan was arrogant or off-putting in his behavior, but he did challenge the firm's traditions with risk-taking ideas—ideas that other associates and younger partners saw as an indirect criticism of their more conservative approach. Even before this new team was formed, Brendan's colleagues had made his existence difficult. More than once, someone "forgot" to brief Brendan before a key meeting. When they went for lunch as a group, they sometimes didn't ask Brendan to join them, making a point of apologizing to him later for failing to include him (thus communicating that he had been marginalized).

On the new future growth team, the Marginalize game involved sometimes subtle but significant actions by other team members. For instance, Brendan received more than his fair share of low-level tasks, such as looking up articles and statistics—tasks that could easily have been assigned to someone in the research department. When Brendan came up with an idea that he was passionate about, team members grilled him mercilessly and nitpicked the idea to death. When Brendan complained about the way he was being treated, they talked to him about the need to be a team player and to learn to compromise—they marginalized him by making him feel guilty.

It shouldn't have surprised anyone when Brendan resigned to take a job with another top consulting firm . . . or that he flourished in an environment where he was not marginalized.

Games: An Under-the-Radar Problem

Even Brendan might not have characterized his peers' marginalizing behaviors as part of a game. Few managers or employees would. They might acknowledge that they work in politicized environments where they must be savvy about how to get what they want—that a certain amount of manipulation and alliance building is necessary to get ahead and get what they want—but game playing is often a subconscious activity.

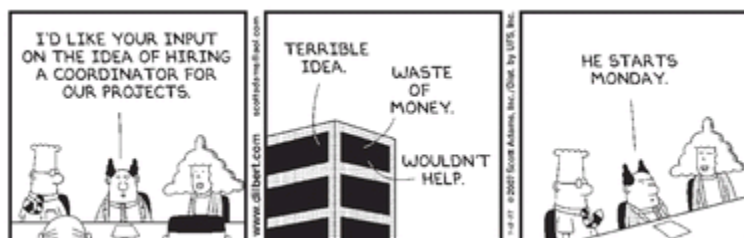
For this reason, it's a particularly dangerous and vexing problem. Games do their damage beneath the surface. They sap a company's people of energy and commitment. They lock people into routines and rituals that hamper flexibility and thwart change efforts.

If not for our particular backgrounds, areas of interest, and involvement with change efforts, we probably would have never identified these game-playing behaviors. We came up through the commercial, supply chain, and human resources functions at major U.S. and European multinational companies based in South America and Europe (Mauricio) and in Europe, the United States, and Asia (Phil), and shared an interest in what was causing productivity losses in organizations.

In 2004, as we were discussing this subject, we started to realize that beneath the surface of seemingly normal work activities, games were being played. We began describing some of these games to ourselves, and as we did so, we noticed that they seemed to echo some of the cartoons of Scott Adams. We asked ourselves, “Why do people laugh at Dilbert?” and understood that these cartoons often derive their humor from the counterproductive games people play in the workplace, as the cartoon on the following page illustrates:

This cartoon is an example of a game we call Token Involvement, in which a manager encourages his direct reports to participate with ideas and suggestions, but the encouragement is in fact a sham, as he has already decided what he wants to do.

DILBERT: © Scott Adams/Dist. By United Feature Syndicate, Inc.



As we reflected on our experiences and those of our clients through this game lens, we realized that people regularly exhibited “weird” game-related behaviors in organizations, and everybody considered them “normal” (and, in some organizations, they really are the norm). Clearly, these behaviors hurt rather than helped groups in their pursuit of objectives.

At the same time, we were fortunate to meet some leaders who neither played nor facilitated these games. They inspired and promoted open, productive, and creative behaviors in their people. Unlike these leaders, the majority of the people we observed and worked with were unaware of their unproductive behaviors and the negative impact they had. The more we studied these behaviors, the more we saw the gamesmanship involved: how there were winners and losers, how people were manipulated to gain an edge, how hidden agendas were behind what people often said and did. So we began talking about organizational games with others—with more than one hundred executives from different industries, different geographical regions, and different levels. They were intrigued with the idea and were curious about how to deal with these games effectively.

For the past few years, we’ve been collecting and analyzing our game data and categorizing games by type. We’ve also created a method that can be used for reducing the frequency and number of games, a method derived from our experience and from observation of individuals and organizations that play fewer games.

We’ll be the first to acknowledge that our list of organizational games is incomplete and that our method isn’t perfect. This is uncharted territory, at least from an organizational perspective. Some game experts (most famously Eric Berne) have written about this subject from the individual psychological standpoint. We, in contrast,

have focused on the organizational perspective, looking at the games that emerge within typical work groups.

As we began working on this book and interviewing business executives, we quickly learned five lessons:

1. This topic is more controversial than we had initially thought; many people were unwilling to be acknowledged in this book and gave us interviews only under the condition of anonymity.
2. The notion of work games resonated with many individuals; people told us that this is “exactly what goes on” in their organization.
3. The loss of productivity caused by games is huge and hugely frustrating for many managers.
4. Everyone is complicit in games; game playing is a part of human nature, and although some people play harder and more often than others, everyone plays some of the time.
5. No one had any idea about how to get game playing under control; we discovered a deep sense of helplessness, as well as a strong propensity to blame people at the top for the situation (in a way itself a game).

This book is an attempt to explain games and then help you in dealing with them—personally, within a team, as a team leader, or even as the leader of a whole organization. The good news is that simple awareness and understanding of games have an enormously positive impact. Once you’re conscious that they exist and you know what to look for, your odds of diminishing them increase significantly.

What This Book Will Tell You and How It Will Tell It

Expect to be educated and entertained. During our research and interviews, we learned a lot about this fascinating subject. We're going to pass on that learning in the form of organizational game descriptions, stories about games, and suggestions about what to do to reduce them (and what not to do). The stories we're going to relate are especially instructive, as they show how games play out in typical business situations: meetings, presentations, budget discussions, performance reviews, online communications, and periods of change. We did not name the companies where these games take place. We've also created fictitious composites based on real company games. We found that people didn't like to admit that games were being played on their watch; others were afraid that their employer wouldn't want them to talk about what was going on. At a time when increased productivity and growth are mandatory, game playing has especially negative connotations.

Chapter One defines common games and describes the traits which indicate that a game is being played. In Chapters Two through Four, we address the key issues surrounding games played at work: the impact games have on organizations, the environmental factors that make games so tempting today, and why individuals and organizations often ignore or downplay the negative impact.

Chapters Five through Seven offer a process for reducing game playing consisting of three steps: Awakening, Choice, and Execution (ACE). This process will help give you and your people the option of engaging in open, honest discussions rather than resorting to secretive, dishonest games.

Chapters Eight through Ten combine a broader organizational perspective with the individual manager's viewpoint. Although it's crucial for managers of small groups to manage the game playing within their area of control, it's also essential that leaders look at the impact of games on the entire enterprise. We'll focus on the ecology of games, the interlocking patterns of games that dominate different organizations. Next, we'll address a subject near and dear to our hearts: how game playing thwarts any type of change and what can be done to counter this effect. After that, we'll examine the role of the CEO and how what he or she does affects game management.

Chapter Eleven describes a company that has a very low level of game playing. What does such a company look like and feel like to work in? The description of Composite Corporation is built from the very best examples of departments and units we have seen in the real world.

As you move through these chapters, you'll find that games reveal how people misuse their time and energy to deceive, manipulate, and cast blame . . . and how they do so with great creativity and Machiavellian skill. No one is perfect, and games reveal the flaws we all possess. As we examine these flaws, we gain invaluable insights into human work behaviors.

Who This Book Is for and How to Use It

Whether you're a young professional just starting your career or a CEO at the top of an organization, this book is relevant to you. In our current high-stress and highly volatile environment, people are playing games more frequently and more intensely than ever before. If you don't understand what these games are and how they affect your group and your company, then you will be powerless to prevent them from having a negative effect. Therefore, this book is an educational tool, bringing you insight into why people play games and what these games involve.

Whether you are an individual performer, or have only a few people reporting to you, or you're running a company with thousands of employees, this book will provide you with a process for counteracting the impact of games on your particular group of people.

Whether you're an active player of games or merely a "bystander" (watching while other people play), the process for minimizing games is essentially the same. Obviously, if you're initiating or involved in games played in your company, you need to pull back from these behaviors. But even if you're not, the ACE process we share in the book's middle section applies. Awakening to games, making the choice not to play or facilitate them, and executing a strategy to substitute straight talk for games are what every manager and leader needs to do.

If you're an organizational leader, this book is especially useful. As you have grown in different organizations, you have no doubt witnessed many of the games described in this book. You may well have learned how to play certain games—or you may have learned not to interfere when