

Strategy is Serious Play

Strategy is generally aimed at producing long-term plans that take into account future changes in an organisation's environment, preparing it to respond to opportunities and threats. We aim to predict accurately and, avoiding risk, to unfold our actions according to a precise design. Indeed it should all go like clockwork. This mechanistic metaphor represents our ideal and we are disappointed if our plans do not quite work out. This is the serious, machine-based model of strategy.

There is another aspect of strategy that we tend to overlook. That is the play of unknown, uncertain and unpredictable forces with which we will inevitably have to interact and to which we are challenged to respond. This emergent quality is what makes us, and our organisations, vital and creative.

Is the old protestant work ethic still lingering or is it the ever greater pressure to do more with less that, for many of us, has driven the fun out of what we do for a living? Whatever the cause, if there is less fun, there is also less energy, creativity and capacity for dealing with the next unpredictable eventuality. It is worth, then, considering what people mean when they talk about 'serious play'.



What is Serious Play?

Serious and play are not necessarily contradictory. Life is a drama and to play is to 'play out' the drama. As in a game, what occurs between the players determines the outcome. Learning to play is learning to be a strategist. Like the Magister Ludi in Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*, the role of the strategist is to design the game as well as the way the game is played.

What gives life zest is not knowing for certain what the future holds. Total predictability, even if it were possible, would be stifling – the nature of life is emergence and, as living beings, we need that surprise quality in which we join the game of life. In recent decades we seem to have forgotten that work and play are two sides of the same coin. We have split the two apart, working so we can play, and in so doing have lost the meaning of work and the value of play. The schism between the two is a split in our own being and a major source of stress.

Let us look then at that wonderful concept of serious play:

Serious – equates to left-brain, logical, reductionist, fragmentary, mechanistic, efficient.

Play equates to right-brain, imagination, pattern forming and recognising, holistic, organic, effective.

Left-brain strategy is predictive, controlling, meaning-serving (i.e. bound by the past)

Right-brain strategy is creative, opportunistic, meaning-making (i.e. creates the future)

Balance

Serious and play need one another! We need a balance between left and right-brain thinking. We have erred much towards the left-brain side of public and organisational life, leaving right-brain 'play' as something to be consigned to our leisure time, where, unfortunately, it too has been subjected to mechanistic exploitation. We need to restore the balance and integration between the two, before the price to society becomes too high or degradation becomes irreversible.

Three hundred years of reductionist and fragmentary thinking have given us science

and technology, put men on the moon, given us a digital world of instant information and lavish entertainment, fast cars, composite materials, labour-saving devices and high-tech homes. All that, at the price of separating us from our place in the web of life on the planet and of alienating us from our own nature as living beings. Now, as we find ourselves and our planet increasingly out of balance, stressed, neurotic and seriously overworked, it may be time to restore the harmony of life and work.

Over the last 150 years, education too has been based on the mechanistic, reductionist paradigm. Although early theories of how people learn have been discredited, all educationists are themselves products of the system, so are unwittingly continuing a sub-optimal way of thinking! As most education is designed to enable people to pass exams, there is a predisposition to believing that there is a right answer to every question. We leave school and college having not really learned how to learn or how to think. The system has encouraged a linear way of thinking that, not surprisingly, permeates the way organisations work.

So, how can we bring play into our work? How can we begin to restore creativity – the ability to play the game as it emerges and to make meaning out of life experience? Let us consider three key factors that combine to make a difference.

Vision

There is a hierarchy of energies – from the coarsest energies that hold matter in its place in the universe, through the energies by which everyday work gets done, through to the finer energies of our feelings and thoughts and desires. Play transforms coarse energies into finer ones.

Finer energy can 'organise' the coarser (but not the other way round) as illustrated by the thought that operates the hand, which strikes the key that activates the valve that moves the machine that shifts the mountain. The energy that organises is such as; sense of purpose, courage, confidence, vision; without which no coarse energy gets deployed except by brute force – a woefully ineffective way to get results as seen recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The strategic leader reaches for the immanent form that can organise energy in the present to make the action that will realise the future. We can see the future not as 'time yet to come' but as 'potential to be realised' (and therefore inherently present). Vision is the key to accessing this resource.

Identity

Identity holds things together – the corporate identity, the identity of a community, a team, a family – or even my identity as a person. If we doubt our identity as individuals, our world falls apart. In developing true teams (as opposed to groups who merely have team in their title) leaders help people clarify their common purpose as the source of identity – the beacon about which they can self-organise.

Identity is not a soft and fuzzy thing but the primary guide that unifies teams as living systems and enables the whole to manifest more than the sum of its parts. As leaders know, discovering identity is the secret of successful living, both at the level of a single person or of an entire organisation.

Intent

Intent is an act of will - a response to the challenge imagination proposes when it makes an excursion into the domain of not-yet-realised possibilities we call the 'future'. When we take the challenge we enter a game of our choosing. In it we play with life itself to make what we can of the relationships and resources at our disposal in the field of the game.

Think of the DNA in the seed, which in a sense contains the tree in all its detail but not yet realised. Is the future present in the seed? In a way it is – but the seed is not a promise so much as an intention.

The game has yet to be played, with all its uncertainties, and the potential tree may turn out straight and tall or bent in the wind; or may perish early. Challenge, then, calls forth intent – the authentic spirit of the man. The strategic leader seriously takes the challenge and then plays the game.

Serious Play

Serious play brings the system to life. It combines aspiration with creativity. It appeals to the vital spark in us that seeks the meaning of what it is to be truly human – developing maturity as a person, as a team member, part of an organisation, a contributor to a community or as a pillar of our family. It involves us in being all we can be as leaders by doing what is ours to do.

In the context of organisations, serious play manifests as innovation - in planning, in production, in selling, in managing, in working and especially in relationships. Serious play involves breaking down divides, using exercises, simulations, meditation, visualisation, physical activity, arts and theatre, lateral thinking, visual thinking and mental modelling. Serious play makes work fun and enables fun to contribute to work. Serious play puts back together as one whole that which we have divided – the making of value and of meaning. People who know how to engage in serious play are happy, fulfilled and wealthy in spirit.

Bring these three together – create the vision, develop identity, awaken intent – and then play seriously! The results are higher energies to organise lower ones, access to futures to which we aspire and the fulfilment of the game-play of meaning-making. Any strategist worth his salt is a serious player.

So, what does it mean in practice?

The first players who need to explore serious play are those with the greatest influence - the senior team in the organisation. They need to ensure they are a team and that they see strategic leadership as their business. They are the people who, with practice, can show others how the game is to be played. They are the ones who can lift aspirations and be both serious and playful, making of everyone a strategic leader, no longer divided unto themselves, but whole, vital, strong and capable people who know who they are and are organised to create meaning and value.

As old structures dissolve, new modes of relating are emerging. They will enable people to make the connections they need to be highly effective, to cross old divides and cut out wasteful practices, duplication of effort and much bean-counting. The result will be leaner, fitter and faster organisations ready for the play of life and equipped to emerge from the game ever stronger. In such a game, strategy is serious play.

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