

GAMES LEADERS PLAY

FOREWORD.

Every game is composed of two parts, an outer game and an inner game. The outer game is played against an external opponent and to reach an external goal.¹ In business, the stakes of games are high, emotions are tense, knowledge workers ² require experience rather than management.

However, neither mastery, nor satisfaction can be found in the playing of any game without giving some attention to the relatively neglected the inner game or the inner challenges we face. In this article the inner game will be illustrated through my personal experience.

THE NEW ERA.



* Supported by
YAOYAO MA VAN AS' illustrations.

Inner Game: It was one of these sunny days in March 2020 when my boss scheduled an unplanned meeting to discuss something important. My reptile brain was going through a quest to define possible reasons right until the moment I heard: - *How much are you committed to our company?* To say that I was taken aback by the frankness of it, would be to say nothing. - *More than I could describe in words. Why?* - *I see. I am confident you will be the right fit to lead our department. They need someone like you.* There was something that both attracted and terrified me at the same time. I'd have to say it was a mere feeling of awe to get the chance to take over the team in such uncertain times that spurred me into immediate joy. Joy to go into mission mode and put others first.

¹ Gallwey, W. Timothy. The inner game of tennis.

² "*knowledge workers*"; a term coined by Peter Drucker, meaning people who think for a living unlike manual labourers.

The concept of leadership in crisis for those in managing positions is a no brainer. By trial and error, we would always manage to grope for the right strategy, well-defined goals and employee satisfaction before one day we found the world turned upside down. Covid-19 has not only accelerated and broadened the Fourth Industrial Revolution with the rapid expansion of e-commerce, online education, digital health and remote work, it also brought teams across different competencies and geographies together.

Undoubtedly, these interrelated shifts have influenced business priorities, and reshaped the capabilities required of leaders to succeed in the future. A year after the crisis entered our businesses and lives, let me share with you my observation on what four practices can help transform human interactions and their livelihoods now and after the pandemic is behind us.

ONE. THE NEW CURRENCY.

Like never before, reskilling and obtaining new skills have become crucial. While some companies' emergency response was to cut costs at every possible touchpoint, others realized it was high time to invest in learning. In this way, employees perform better and the business grows faster. Additionally, by conveying a sense of importance that motivates others to achieve new goals, there will be intrinsic desire to develop and excel. Having one-size-fits-all development plans is a road to nowhere with demanding workforce today that put learning as number one attracting feature for an employer. **Learning agility is the new currency of today's reality and leaders committed to the good cause of empowerment, have to prioritize that.**

A survey published in Harvard Business Review found young high achievers were often dissatisfied with the lack of mentoring and coaching they received.

To induce learning in daily work, leader can become even more curious about what employees want for their futures or ask what they need right now to overcome challenges and then listen to their responses. In most cases they want conversations that expand their minds as well as their skills.



Inner Game: As the new role endowed me with keen enthusiasm and the new level of responsibility, I actively engaged in career planning by clearly identifying my strengths and values. What helped me was Peter Drucker's piece on Managing Oneself where he talks about putting ourselves where our strength can produce best results. And the best way to know your strength is by asking ourselves the following questions:

- What are my strengths? (By the way, according to strength-based management pioneered by Marcus Buckingham, one should waste as little effort as possible on improving areas of low competence. It takes far more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence.)
- How do I perform?
- How do I learn?
- What are my values?
- Where do I belong?
- What should I contribute?

TWO. WHAT IF I DON'T BELONG HERE?

"Life is no "brief candle" to me. It's a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

G. Bernard Shaw

By injecting learning into the culture, we must not forget that people learn best in the areas they feel most purposeful about. And as Simon Sinek put it *"Great leaders give something to believe in, not something to do."*

Let's face it, it is not uncommon in life to remain in a position that doesn't fulfill your greatest desires even though you are successful in that position. The other issue is that a person may have a nagging sense that they are doing damage to themselves and maybe to the company by staying put. In addition, their unhappiness maybe doing damage to others, such as members of their family, because of what is going on at their work. In this case, a person needs a great deal of guidance and help and leadership to find a way out or a better place where they can be a good fit. If the thoughtful answer to the question "Where do I really belong?" is that they don't belong where they currently work, the next question is why? Maybe they don't belong in the culture. Maybe they feel unseen or unheard. Or maybe something is going on in their personal lives (which we will talk about in part three). Organizations like people, have values. To be effective in an organization, a person's values must be compatible with the organization's values. They do not need to be the same, but they must be close enough to coexist. Otherwise, the person will not produce results, and also will be frustrated. ³ Leaders need to bear in mind that people's **unique contributions will be found at the point where their strengths and their values are met.**

This leads us to believe, it's our job as leaders not to just invent new incentives every quarter but to inspire people, give them that sense of cause and vision that their work is worth more. Leaders should make sure they make people feel like they matter, they are feeling invested and appreciated which, in turn, is a crucial factor for millenials.

This is the true joy of the game we call Work, where the being used up for is a purpose recognized by yourself.



Inner Game slash Inner Critic: I'm not sure I'm capable of doing it. How come I didn't know about it before? Am I entitled to solve it? Am I the right person for the job?

It was hard to say at what point I found myself at the bottom of the new role curve overwhelmed by Mr. Self-Doubt coming into play. Before I let these overriding thoughts turn into self-fulfilling prophecies, I started focusing more on my goals and the more I performed the new tasks successfully, the more my sense of self-efficacy ⁴ developed.

³ Drucker, Peter. *The effective executive in action*.

⁴ "self-efficacy", a term coined by Albert Bandura, meaning one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task

I also started interacting more with company leaders and by seeing people similar to myself succeed was raising my beliefs that I too possessed the needed capabilities. Requesting a coach was another important milestone to help me find my True North and be positively encouraged to achieve my goals.

It was also equally essential to remedy my bad habits—the things I did (being more tactical than strategic) or failed to do (blocking calendar for focused work) that inhibited my effectiveness and performance.

THREE. MENTAL HEALTH IS REAL

Since last year Mental Health has been affecting strong and healthy people. We all suffered trauma. At some point each of us felt off the game.

The OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann pointed out, "**The sooner you deal with the question of lives, the better you will deal with the question of livelihoods going forward.** But also you have to keep an eye on how you're going to deal with the recovery period later. In the meantime, however, we're not out of the woods yet".

The question of livelihood (i.e means of securing the basic necessities of life) ⁵ and the employer's willingness to embrace the employee as a whole is more likely to contribute to the flourishing state and to an organic organization. In the context of management, the organic form of organization is often considered as a living entity characterized by a network structure of control, authority, and communication, and knowledge may be located anywhere in the network. The emphasis here is on the fit between the organization and the environment, and to achieve this, **it is imperative that the psychological needs of the members of the organization are satisfied.** ⁶

Psyche of an employee has changed tremendously. Returning back to pre-pandemic state of being is no longer viable. Another challenge we are going to be facing soon is logging out of Zoom and re-entering three-dimensional space. Here the leader needs to be as supportive and empathetic like never before.

⁵ Wikipedia

⁶ Burns and Stalker. The management of innovation



Inner Game: It happened. No matter how much I loved what I did, productivity and excitement started escaping me and exhaustion and sleep-deprivation trickling in. Days were long and dull. I was going to bed late, waking up late, unwilling to show up on calls with camera and socially isolated myself. I was doing incredible things but I was a burn out little thing. It became clear that I needed to do more than just work less. I had to rehabilitate my mind and body to get back to a healthy place and realign my work - life balance.

In his book *The man who Invented the Corporate Society*, Peter Drucker suggested *"Develop a genuine interest, which permits you to live in a different world, with different peers whose opinions are meaningful to you... One needs a true outside interest, not just waterskiing. It not only develops your strengths, it helps to protect you against the inevitable shocks."*

I would ask you to consider how you can begin to change your habits right now — rather than at some point in the future when you magically have more time.

FOUR. THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT THE FUTURE IS TO CREATE IT.

The title for this part might already sound like a broken record to many. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that managers must accept the need to work systematically on making the future. This does not mean the managers can work for the elimination of risks and uncertainties. This power is not given to mortal man. The one lesson we will remember the pandemic has taught us is **to find and occasionally create the right risk and exploit uncertainty**. The purpose of the work on making the future is not to decide what should be done tomorrow, but what should be done today to have a tomorrow.



Inner Game: I remember how it took us zero days to jump into remote work. The fact that we already experimented with it and the efficiency of communication across the company eased a bit the whole trepidation connected with the ambiguous. Long before, we had started growing teams by adding team members from different parts of the world, as well as create a diverse and cross-cultural environment. In the end, it paid off with resilience and adaptability to the new reality. By trying to create future possibilities, I have also faced the other side of the coin that meant putting personal interests aside to explore the unknown and acting on convictions and principles even when it requires personal risk-taking.

FINAL WORD.

Nurturing the next normal that will be better than what it replaced will be a long-term test for all leaders across continents. With all due respect, to act efficiently and be able to thrive in the new normal, we must approach work and staff differently. To ensure new accomplishments, managers need resilience and open mind to fully grasp the meaning of Marshal Goldsmith's book title that reads **What got you here, won't get you there.**