CHAPTER 1

Let the Games Begin

What Games Are and How They Are Played in Organizations

Games would be easier for people to deal with if they were purely conscious activities, limited in number, and overtly played. Unfortunately, people are often unaware that they're playing games, and a variety of games exist, many of which are covert and subtle in nature. Thus an understanding of organizational games is essential. If you're aware of the particular games you or your people play and how they affect individuals and the organization, you're in a much better position to handle them. A lack of knowledge about games allows them to thrive. The more you know, the better able you'll be to limit their damage and turn the energy of your people in more productive directions.

Therefore, we want to focus here on helping you understand what an organizational game is and the common types. First, though, we need to define our terms.

The Theory and Practice of Games

At its most basic level, a game is a competition between two or more people in which the object is to win. No doubt, you've played board games, sports games, and the like, for which the rules of play are strictly defined. Games aren't always so simple or transparent, however. A branch of mathematics is devoted to "game theory," which was developed by John von Neumann in his book *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* ([1944] 2007, with Oskar Morgenstern). Neumann demonstrated that there was more to games than probability; he coined such terms as "zero sum games" and "payoffs."

Of greater familiarity is the work of psychiatrist Eric Berne ([1964] 1996), the founder of transactional analysis, who wrote the book *Games People Play*. Berne suggested that many social interactions revolve around games—that is, the interactions seem to be about one thing, but beneath the surface are concealed motivations and attempts to gain payoffs. Berne posits that these games are dishonest and prevent more meaningful ways of living.

In short, the mathematical and psychological theorists recognize that games are more than they seem, that they are often driven by hidden agendas and personal payoffs, and that they can do more harm than good.

Now let's bring this theoretical construct to life with the story of one particular game we observed being played in a large organization. The company had recently introduced a 360-degree feedback tool to foster manager development. Harold, a senior manager, received a significant amount of negative feedback from his team. Shortly thereafter, he contacted Stan, an HR executive in charge of the feedback program, and said he would like to have a meeting with his team. Harold explained to Stan that he wanted a better understanding of what behaviors he needed to change as well as more examples of behaviors that caused problems for team members. He emphasized that he wanted to communicate to his team that he cared about their feedback.

Given Harold's comments, Stan thought a meeting would be productive. Nonetheless, Stan insisted that certain ground rules be observed during the meeting, including refraining from defensiveness or accusations. Harold agreed to these ground rules.

When the meeting started, Harold was humble and polished, and seemed eager to hear additional feedback. People opened up and shared their concerns. As everyone talked about possible solutions to the problems raised, Harold became a bit defensive. Still, he seemed committed to implementing some of their suggestions until he mentioned that he intended to talk to the company's CEO, with whom he had a "close relationship," about what might be done about team morale. Then Harold said that it was too bad that a few people were spoiling things for the rest of the team. Immediately, a look of fear appeared on the faces of several team members; they clearly took this reference to mean that he intended to get rid of or move out some people.

After the meeting, Stan debriefed Harold about how things had gone, and Harold said the meeting was useful because "I figured out who was behind this, and that these individuals were a serious drag on department productivity because of their negativity."

In the following months, Harold created a tremendously antagonistic environment within his department, setting people against each other and focusing their energy on conflict rather than work objectives. Though Harold was eventually fired, his gamesmanship was very destructive.

The games Harold played included the following:

- *Token Involvement*. In this game, you pretend you want the input of others but are actually pursuing your own agenda. Harold suggested that he wanted to hold the meeting for the good of his team and for his own self-improvement, but in reality his goal was to identify people who were criticizing him, and he ignored the feedback.
- *The Boss Said*. In this game, you ally yourself with a powerful figure in order to intimidate others. Harold's reference to his close relationship with the CEO had this purpose.
- *Gotcha*. In this game, the goal is to catch and punish people who have "erred." Harold obviously used the meeting to figure out who was behind the negative responses in the original 360-degree feedback.

We should add that Harold may not have been playing these games on a conscious level; he may have initially wanted to use the meeting to become a better manager. Once the meeting started, though, Harold reverted reflexively to games he had played throughout his managerial career. In Harold's mind, he may have rationalized that he was simply protecting himself and his team from negative influences, but in reality, he was playing his favorite games.

The Traits: Signs and Symptoms That a Game Is Being Played

Defining something as a game can become a question of semantics. You can make the argument that just about any organizational activity is a game of some sort. When you take a few too many watercooler breaks, you're playing the "delay" game. When you spend one day working hard in your office and don't do your usual socializing in the hallway, you're playing the "turtle" game.

We don't define games so broadly. Or rather, our focus is on counterproductive games—those that drain people's time and energy, involve more than one person, and have ulterior motives and negative consequences for the organization. The following are the five traits that characterize these games:

1. *Manipulation*. People exhibit dishonest behavior to achieve their objectives. Sometimes this behavior is obvious and provocative; other times it's subtle. It may involve hiding information from a boss—telling only part of the story to make someone else look bad. It may involve making a problem appear more serious than it actually is, in the hopes of creating false expectations—the professional service provider who convinces a client that a goal is almost impossible to achieve, so that when he helps her achieve it, he'll come off as a hero. A person who is playing a game is not being straight; there is always some deceit and underhandedness.
2. *Paradoxical consequences*. Games often involve short-term gain for the player and short- and long-term losses for

the group (a colleague, the team, the department, or the company). For example, an individual plays a game to gain power over a peer, but most of his energy is focused on achieving this goal rather than on achieving a larger work goal. He may find himself being promoted and having power over his colleague, but he probably failed to take care of business on other fronts. Ultimately, he and the organization will pay the price for this neglect.

3. *Repetitiveness*. When certain behaviors become habits, they can also become games. For instance, most managers try to negotiate the budgets they receive from headquarters if they don't believe they are feasible. This is normal. However, when a manager believes that the budget is feasible, yet continues to negotiate budgets as a reflex or routine response, this behavior has become a game. When you always engage in a certain type of behavior in a certain type of situation, you're probably playing your favorite organizational game. Games create behavioral "grooves," and people become dependent on playing them and having people around who play the same games.
4. *Contagious effect*. Games are viral and thrive in certain cultures. In other words, games don't exist in one crevice of the organization and remain there. They spread throughout the company relatively quickly. We've seen such games as Sandbagging (managers knowingly lowball sales forecasts as a negotiating ploy) spread with surprising speed, because when the game appears to "work" for one manager, others follow suit (and may even feel they "need" to follow suit just to survive and compete).

5. *Group activity*. You need two or more people to play. This is a crucial trait to understand, as the games you play will trigger the games your people engage in. They will follow your lead.

Games people play can be "interlocking"—that is, the game one person favors can fit nicely with the game a colleague enjoys. When people say that someone is a good fit with the organization or with a team, what they are also saying is that the individual's games interlock with the games played by a given group.

Beyond these traits, one frequent sign that games are being played is that everyone is pretending they're not. People are either in denial about games, or they've decided that the game playing is limited to a small number of highly political players. If you were to ask them if the majority of employees are distracted and diverted (from their tasks) by games, they would respond that goals are aligned, objectives are clear, performance is managed, and conversations and decisions are rational. They may admit that some political animals who enjoy manipulating others do exist in the organization, but they would rationalize that this is true of every organization and that these game players are a distinct and identifiable minority.

We should note that the prevalence and intensity of games played varies based on culture and situation. For instance, when a company's culture favors transparency, intellectual honesty, teamwork, and open debate, the prevalence of game playing is usually rather low. In contrast, fear-based, strongly hierarchical cultures, for example, tend to encourage game playing—people see game playing as the way to climb the organizational ladder, and fear that if they don't play, they'll be "losers." In these cultures, games become a way of managing the uncertainty and dependency that comes from being down the hierarchical chain.

Similarly, extreme short-term pressure and environments where disruptive change is taking place also tend to encourage games. In these situations, people use games to relieve the pressure as well as to deal with change; games provide an alternative method to deal with new people, policies, and processes.

Tangible or individually based activities also mitigate against game playing. When people are focused on creating program code or responding to a service center inquiry, for instance, they tend to work alone to achieve a clear, measurable objective. At the other extreme, project-based work, such as trying as a team to come up with a more innovative process to deal with slow customer service, can quickly deteriorate into a game; for example, team members waste energy on the Scapegoat game, scapegoating those who designed the original customer service process.

Now that you know the common traits of organizational games and the environment and situations that spawn game playing, let's look at our list of some more frequently played games and what they entail.

The Names of the Games: What They Are, How They're Played, and Why They're Harmful

What follows is a sample of some of the more frequently played games in organizations. (In the Appendix, you'll find a more extensive list of organizational games.) In every company, games will vary depending on everything from the corporate culture to work situations to personal proclivities. Nonetheless, the games on this list represent those that we have found to be played most often.

We've divided these games into three categories: Interpersonal, Leadership, and Budget. This division reflects the stakeholders with whom people tend to engage in games:

1. Interpersonal games—played with peers and bosses
2. Leadership games—played with direct reports and consultants
3. Budget games—played about the organization's money

These categories contain some overlap; an individual playing a Budget game may also be playing it in a leadership capacity; or a game that we've placed in the Interpersonal section may have an impact on budgetary issues. Categorizing is, however, a good way to get a handle on the main purpose of a given game.

Table 1.1 is the list of some of the most frequently played games, which we will describe in more detail, including examples illustrating the behaviors typical of each game.

Interpersonal Games

I1. Gotcha

In Gotcha, people act as if they receive points for identifying and communicating others' mistakes. This game is more likely to occur in companies that foster individual rather than collective recognition and that promote internal competition among employees to increase productivity.

TABLE 1.1: Frequently Played Games

Interpersonal	Leadership	Budget
Gotcha	Gray Zone	Sandbagging
Marginalize	Keep Them Guessing	Slush Fund
Blame	No Decision	Lowballed Baseline
The Boss Said	Token Involvement	Quarterly Earnings
Big Splash Career Hopper	Kill the Messenger	
Victim	Window Watcher	
Gossip	Divide and Conquer	
No Bad News	Scapegoat	
Copy		
Pre-Deal		

Mistakes are seen as an opportunity to criticize others and put them down, and thus people hide mistakes rather than use them as learning opportunities. Also, any criticism will be seen as an attack, rather than as an opportunity for improvement.

Example: One CEO's favorite game was to go through "prereads" of presentations and try to identify the mistakes in advance. During the presentation, he would point out that "on page twenty-six, bullet point three is inconsistent with the data table on page seventeen." Even when the presenter was able to defend the inconsistency, the CEO would identify another and then another after that until he "caught" the presenter. Invariably, too much time and attention would be focused on analyzing the inconsistency, and the more important points the presenter was making were often lost.

12. Marginalize

In Marginalize, individuals are exiled from teams or groups because they challenge the status quo, aren't one of the boss's people, or don't "fit in" for other reasons. This game can be subtle or overt: leaving a person off distribution lists, not sending minutes to her, forgetting to call her. This cuts the person out of the decision-making loop and limits her effectiveness. People are often marginalized not because they're failing to contribute or are a drag on teams but for personal or political reasons. This game is often played in a passive-aggressive manner—for example, a manager gives a direct report a thankless task that prevents him from working on a mission-critical piece of business, but apologizes profusely for having to give him the thankless task, explaining that "you were the only one available to do it; I really appreciate it."

Example: The CEO of a food manufacturer had a favorite among her direct reports, a guy who was highly innovative and worked extremely hard. His peers, however, viewed this individual as the "teacher's pet" and played the Marginalize game by leaving him out of informal discussions, "forgetting" to invite him to meetings, and often ganging up on him when he presented a concept. It reached a point where it became difficult for this individual to communicate an innovative idea; he was discouraged despite working hard and continually met with resistance from his colleagues. Although this story may give the impression that the marginalizing efforts of these colleagues were obvious, the employees were actually quite clever in the way they played the game. In the CEO's presence, they seemed to treat this teacher's pet like everyone else. In private, however, they schemed against him in small but significant ways. Ultimately, he ended up resigning and taking a job with another organization.

13. Blame

In Blame, individuals point the finger at others in order to excuse their own behavior. For example, a manager may complain that he is not achieving successful results because top management allows the finance department to keep bureaucracy in the system. Blame can be placed on individuals, groups, events, or situations, but in all cases, it is part of a win-lose game where instead of engaging in an honest conversation or in a productive investigation of the real cause of failure, people devote their energy to setting up scapegoats and spreading word of their mistakes.

Example: When Costanza told Jack he was going to receive a smaller bonus than the previous year, she emphasized that she was at the mercy of the new human resources policy regarding bonuses, though she felt that Jack deserved a larger bonus. In truth, Costanza did have flexibility to give Jack a larger bonus, but she felt that Jack had not contributed as much as he should have during the past year and that a lower bonus was what was fair. At the same time, though, she didn't want to create tension between the two of them, so she blamed HR. This Blame game took various forms, including Costanza's continuing remarks to Jack about how HR was a pain and e-mails to Jack about other "wrong-headed" moves by the HR group. The game also took the form of Costanza's complimenting Jack excessively, as if her words were compensation for the bonus money Jack didn't receive.

14. The Boss Said

When playing the Boss Said, people invoke the name of a senior executive to help them get what they want or to add weight to the points they're making. They may make a request and imply that the CEO or some other executive wanted it done. In some instances, they may simply assume that this is what the boss wants. In other instances, they make it up. The game transfers power from the boss to the person who is making the request and using the boss's name. It often is played in cultures where communication is very formal and hierarchical, and no one would dare to raise a challenge or even to ask for clarification from top executives.

Example: See the description of Stan and Harold earlier in the chapter.

15. Big Splash Career Hopper

In this game, a manager new in a role develops a "big idea" (big splash) that will then be heavily marketed as both bold (entailing massive and rapid change) and successful (when judged in the very short term) and will justify his rapid promotion out of this job into another one (career hop), before the actual failure of this big idea catches up with him. In many instances the change is poorly thought through, and the concern during the change is less for the employees making the change than for the marketing and packaging of the change to the senior management (who may like the "ambitious" and "go-getting" tone of the initiative). This game can of course be played serially and constitute a significant part of a career, although it often catches up with a person when he has to remain in a position for a sustained period of time.

Example: Lydia, a manager of a marketing team, had been in position only a few weeks when she determined that what was really needed to "shake up" the team was a big drive on category management in a particular area. She spent a lot of time with consultants preparing the slides to sell to the global head of marketing, as well as effectively using all networking opportunities to pitch the initiative to other decision makers. However, she neglected to involve her own staff in this effort, and thereby missed some important feedback from the market that indicated that a different approach was required. Because Lydia had failed to communicate the rationale for the change to her team, they had no buy-in to the initiative. The change was pushed through (and a number of people who had real concerns that needed to be heard were sidelined as a result), and Lydia was able to sell the program as successful before it was really implemented. Lydia was soon in demand in another segment—she could "do the same for them"—and in less than twelve months, she had moved on before any tangible results of the program could be seen.

16. Victim

"I can't do anything because 'they' have made it impossible for me to do anything [by not recognizing me, by making stupid decisions, by promoting the wrong people, . . .]." This is the common sentiment expressed or thought by someone who plays the Victim game. Senior people may play this game by acting as if they're retired in place. Younger people may simply not work to their full capacity. No matter the age of the people who play the victim, they all spend a great deal of time grousing about why they can't accomplish what they need to accomplish and theorizing about the reasons for it. They often enlist others in these Victim game discussions, and it's easy for a victim mentality to spread and infect a team or other group.

Examples: Because the Victim game can be played in many different ways, we offer two examples here.

Max was a country manager in China for a pharmaceutical company. He had orchestrated the company's move to China two years ago and had set up operations in that company. The first year went much better than expected, but then a sudden downturn occurred for a number of reasons—increased competition from other large pharmaceutical companies, a quality problem with one of their products, the Chinese government's requiring significantly higher financial commitment from Max's company to operate in certain areas, and so on. Max responded by playing the Victim game rather than trying to fix the problems that confronted his company. He began spending an increased amount of time sending memos, e-mails, research, and other forms of communication to headquarters detailing all the factors that were affecting their group's performance. Max was tying up his human resources in justifying their failure in various overly detailed reports, the conclusion of each being that the China group was at the mercy of forces beyond its control.

In another example, Dennis, a thirty-five-year-old manager with a large consumer products company, was asked to join a cross-functional team assembled to help improve the company's knowledge management process. The team included relatively young managers from most of the company's functions—Dennis was in the corporate communications department.

The team was set up because the CEO was a proponent of knowledge management, and he felt that a great deal of organizational know-how wasn't being captured—or that if it was, it wasn't being disseminated to the right people at the right time. Dennis's team was supposed to work on ways to solve these problems.

Dennis had joined the company six years ago; it was his second job after having received an MBA. Initially, he was excited to be part of the organization, but in the last two years, he was twice passed over for promotions, and the boss he liked left the company and was replaced by one whom Dennis didn't like as much. More significant, the culture was somewhat politicized, and the people who did well tended to be those who were skilled at building the right type of relationships.

During the early meetings of the cross-functional team, Dennis didn't speak much, but when he did, it was usually to point out the inherent difficulty of making knowledge management a reality. He agreed that it was a great concept in theory, but in practice he doubted it would do the organization much good. Dennis wondered if their time was being used wisely. He mentioned that a few years ago he was part of another cross-functional team dealing with a diversity initiative, and described how they just spun their wheels and none of their suggestions were ever implemented. As the knowledge management team moved toward making recommendations, Dennis became more vocal; with regard to a given recommendation, he would ask, "Do you really think management is going to approve that?" Or he would warn the team not to make a certain type of recommendation because "it's too costly, and by recommending it, management will see it as an indirect criticism, since they've already spent a huge amount of money on knowledge management technologies."

Dennis managed to ratchet up other team members' sense of victimhood. People began relating their own stories about how the company (that is, a boss) failed to take a suggestion seriously or how they felt ineffectual in another type of situation. Eventually, the team reached consensus on recommendations that were perfectly acceptable and perfectly uninspired. By engaging in a multiplayer Victim game, initiated by Dennis, the team ended up opting for a "safe" recommendation rather than the recommendation they collectively thought was the best for the company.

17. Gossip

In Gossip, players use the rumor mill to gain political advantage. Most people are familiar with this game, as it thrives in volatile cultures—a good description of many organizations these days. The key component of this game is indirect communication. Rather than confront someone directly about a problem you're having with her, you talk to someone else and complain or talk negatively about this individual. You may also plant rumors that are designed to achieve some goal—keeping other people on their toes, sending a warning, sullying a reputation, and so on.

Example: A management team was discussing the possibility of promoting Sharon, a middle manager in finance, to a position where she would be involved in reviewing talent. During the meeting, Roberto, who had had a few run-ins in the past with Sharon, casually mentioned that Sharon wasn't really a "people person." He repeated this "people person" critique in a number of one-on-one conversations with members of the management team, passing on the rumor that a few years ago, Sharon drove an enormously talented man out of her department and that he landed at a competitor. As a result of Roberto's playing the Gossip game, the "not a people person" label stuck, and Sharon didn't receive a promotion she deserved—and one that would have benefited the company.

18. No Bad News

In No Bad News, players avoid or suppress negative data in relentless pursuit of a positive approach. This game can present itself in a variety of situations: avoiding giving someone negative feedback so his feelings won't be hurt; refusing to make a decision on the company strategy because you don't want to place higher priority on one area than on another; promoting a mediocre performer to another team so that you don't have to fire her; hiding poor results from a boss to avoid his wrath; and so on.

Example: Lucien sat down with Jean, his direct report, to discuss his performance review. Lucien was frustrated with Jean because of the latter's lack of initiative and effort. Lucien knew that Jean was smart and highly competent, but also that he was lazy. They had worked together for years, and Jean had always done a good job, but Lucien knew that he wasn't growing or coming close to his potential. At the same time, Lucien didn't want to hurt Jean's feelings, so he watered down his negative remarks to the point that they seemed minor. Although he told Jean that he thought Jean could work harder on some projects, Lucien added, "but I know you have a lot on your plate, and doing more than you're doing would be asking a lot." Lucien plays this same No Bad News game with his bosses as well as his direct reports, putting a positive spin on just about everything. The problem, of course, is that no red flags go up when problems arise, as Lucien disguises those problems through the game.

19. Copy

In Copy, the player sends paper or electronic copies to a boss, a colleague, or someone else who is not in the natural information loop. Copying can provide the copier with a sense of power. It can be used to communicate that the copier has clout. It can also be done to intimidate a third person, letting her know that a copy was sent so as to apprise the receiver of a given situation. Copying anyone outside the natural information loop automatically gets everyone's attention—it can be used for multiple purposes, including offering documentation in case something goes wrong. The key, though, is that it is a sneaky form of communication, one that's done with ulterior motives. It creates suspicion and distrust, as everyone knows the copier has a hidden agenda.

Example: Tojiro copied four different executives in his e-mails whenever he made a decision that entailed some risk. Tojiro, a young executive with a financial services firm, played the Copy game with an eye toward protecting himself in case any of his risky decisions didn't pan out. Because his company's culture was highly results oriented and political, Tojiro saw this game as nothing less than self-preservation. The Copy game was widely played at

Tojiro's company, and people seemed to think that as long as they covered themselves by copying, they wouldn't get hurt if a decision turned out badly. This wasn't the case—the culture was highly punitive—but people comforted themselves with the illusion that if they copied, they would be safe.

I10. Pre-Deal

In Pre-Deal, the player pretends that all the issues will be discussed in a meeting with persons *x, y,* and *z,* but in the meantime makes a pre-deal with a power broker in the organization, and the whole thing is a fait accompli. This is a classic meeting game, one that gives meetings a bad name. People spend hours and hours meeting, but it's all just for show, because one person has an informal agreement with a key decision maker in the organization, and the other people in the meeting are in the dark about this deal.

Example: Margie had what she thought was a terrific way for her group to reduce costs, but she knew that if she presented it during the monthly meeting of the company's financial group, it would engender endless debate and would take a long time for everyone to reach consensus. For this reason, Margie approached the CFO prior to the meeting and explained her cost reduction plan. The CFO liked the idea, and he agreed with Margie that if she were to present it during the next scheduled meeting, it could take weeks or even months before all the objections to it could be addressed. Therefore, the CFO asked Margie not to present the idea during the meeting; they would simply talk about the usual cost-cutting options. After the meeting, the CFO would announce that he had come up with a cost-cutting solution and that Margie would be in charge of implementing it.

Leadership Games

L1. Gray Zone

In Gray Zone, players deliberately foster ambiguity or a lack of clarity about who should do what. The purpose of this game is to avoid clear accountability. It can also be used to create tension between direct reports or departments, resulting in uneasiness that spurs people to work more productively. The Gray Zone game also may provide managers with ways of avoiding conflict with their direct reports; rather than decide something that upsets direct reports, managers operate indecisively and therefore don't clash with their people. Gray Zone may have the benefit of increasing productivity or avoiding conflict in the short run, but this game is the enemy of effective execution in the long run. When people aren't clear about what their roles should be, they perform them poorly; further, the roles aren't linked to organizational goals.

Example: Steve was a senior leader at a large organization with a traditional structure and a manufacturing base. The company was evolving, however, and as it began outsourcing many of its manufacturing operations, it also began restructuring in order to become a faster-moving, more adaptive company. Steve found that as they moved to a matrix-like structure, a number of tension points arose between himself, his direct reports, and his colleagues in other functions. To diminish this tension, Steve played the Gray Zone game. He took advantage of the new, looser reporting and decision-making structure to avoid making clear choices about who was responsible for what project. He would frequently tell his team, "We're all responsible for getting this done," without ever making anyone accountable for a project's completion. In this way, Steve didn't step on anyone's toes, and no one felt slighted or ignored. Of course, relatively little was accomplished in the area for which Steve was responsible.

L2. Keep Them Guessing

In Keep Them Guessing, the player changes her mind on key issues, without acknowledging that she previously had a completely different view or allowing anyone to point this out. People never know which way a manager's mind will go, and so become very cautious in their presentations and recommendations. Some top managers play this game because they want to be viewed as flexible, yet they fail to recognize the cost of hyperflexibility. When no one is sure what a leader believes or wants, confusion or even chaos is the result. People devote themselves to trying to anticipate what a leader requires rather than acting with a sense of purpose and shared mission. Flexibility must be balanced with clear goals and processes, and managers who opt for Keep Them Guessing rather than clarity will lower their group's morale and diminish their output in the long run.

Example: Marianne, an ambitious thirty-three-year-old manager in a relatively young, rapidly expanding organization, wanted to be seen as someone who was highly adaptable—this was the CEO's credo. Consequently, Marianne was quick to note which way the wind was blowing and to move in that direction. She kept an eagle eye on trends and industry events, and every new change in the field influenced how Marianne viewed various policies and practices. Her people, though, were bewildered by her sudden shifts. One day Marianne favored an aggressive policy toward customers; the next she advocated a more cautious approach. Even worse, one day a direct report would go into Marianne's office and ask her how she wanted him to approach a particular customer with a problem, and she would respond in a particular way. A week later, another customer would have a similar problem, and she would offer advice to a direct report that was quite different than what she had provided the first person who asked for help. Direct reports would compare her advice, scratch their heads, and spend a lot of time trying to "read" which approach Marianne favored.

L3. No Decision

No Decision involves finding innumerable reasons not to make a choice. Some of these reasons can make sense on the surface, but the underlying reason for playing this game is that if you don't decide, you can't be punished for making a bad decision. The impetus for playing the No Decision game can come from a variety of sources: people are new to the function or business and don't trust the information they receive; they come from a slow-moving industry where there was more time to make decisions; they are intimidated by a chaotic, fast-moving environment and believe they'll be "safe" if they avoid deciding. Players of this game are often skilled at looking as if they're simply being cautious and are focused on making the right decision slowly. In reality, they are creating task forces, holding meetings, issuing white papers, and creating the impression that they're taking action while in reality they are simply biding their time.

Example: A key position opened up at a major packaged goods company when an A player product manager decided to leave and join a competitor. This was a big loss for the company, and a lot of debate ensued among senior leaders about why he had left and what they might have done differently to keep him. The CEO weighed in and said that it was critical they replace the departed manager with an equally skilled individual and make sure they kept him in place for at least five years. The HR vice president in charge of the search to fill the position started the process by interviewing others in the organization and trying to identify the right specs for the job. Then he began assessing whether any internal candidates existed who met the specs. When he determined that none did, he began looking outside for a qualified candidate. Unfortunately, he couldn't find anyone who was a "good fit." Ultimately, he recommended that the organization split the responsibilities of this unfilled position among three other managers and renew the search in six months to see if a good candidate could be found then.

The HR vice president was playing a version of the No Decision game, making a good show of doing things while knowing that the safest thing to do was nothing (as filling the position with the wrong person or at least one who wasn't as good as the previous job holder was a distinct possibility).

L4. Token Involvement

To play Token Involvement, a manager conducts opinion surveys, focus groups, or involvement meetings to communicate that "your opinion matters," but these activities are done only to make people *feel* involved rather than actually to involve them. The real intention is just to get rid of the complaints and for managers to show their management that they're doing the "right" thing—involving their people in the decision-making process. The same game is played when leaders involve their direct reports superficially, soliciting their views on department strategy but relying exclusively on their own view. Cynicism becomes employees' ultimate response to this game, and they lose respect for management. Perhaps even worse, when management really needs employees to be committed and contributing to a major project, they have great difficulty securing this involvement.

Example: Dan has responded to his new boss's belief in "participatory decision making" by holding weekly meetings with his staff, during which he encourages discussion of the issues facing their group and requests their ideas. A secretary records everyone's ideas and creates a report, which Dan says he will incorporate into his decision making. After making a decision, Dan always thanks certain members of his team for their contributions and emphasizes that the course of action chosen was influenced a great deal by their participation. He also sends an e-mail to his boss extolling the contributions of these individuals.

In reality, Dan always does exactly what he wants to do. He may even sincerely believe that he has actually listened to the ideas of others and integrated them into his decision, but it's clear that he has certain biases and that he always follows these biases when opting for certain tactics and strategies, regardless of the information and concepts others bring to him.

L5. Kill the Messenger

Killing the messenger is an ancient tradition: you take out your frustration on the people bringing you bad news, rather than on those who have created it. This is a game of kings, and it is also a game for leaders who lack a tolerance for negative information. Being able to absorb and learn from negative events is a critical skill for leaders today, yet rather than develop this skill, they play Kill the Messenger. The end result of this game is that people filter their reports to the boss, taking out any reportage that might engender an outburst. These leaders then operate from an unrealistically optimistic perspective; they think things are going great and are unable to plan for downturns or competitors' moves.

Example: Forbasaw, a senior vice president with a marketing services agency, played Kill the Messenger whenever one of her people would tell her something about the firm's clients that she didn't want to hear. Instead of listening quietly and analyzing objectively, she would always respond with an accusation along the lines of "The bad news you're telling me is a result of your not staying on top of the account." In other words, Forbasaw couldn't accept that clients would be unhappy for any reason except that their representative was doing a bad job. Of course, her people learned not to communicate clients' unhappiness, so Forbasaw operated in a blissful bubble, thinking that everything was going fine when in fact there were serious problems with a number of clients but her team was now playing No Bad News.

L6. Window Watcher

The boss doesn't want to fire someone (for financial reasons, for fear of lawsuits, or because of the possibility of some other form of unpleasantness), so he promotes her or moves her to a non-job (a role the Japanese sometimes refer to as window watching), therefore removing her from a position of influence. This is why some companies are filled with "deadwood"—people who keep jobs for years and never really accomplish anything, but don't rock the boat. The Window Watcher game has a tremendously negative impact on productivity, an impact that is often invisible because the individuals given nonessential roles appear to be contributing employees. Part of the Window Watcher game involves creating the illusion that these people are still active, useful members of the organization while shuttling them to the side.

Example: Jim was a recently hired executive with a midsize leisure products manufacturer, and he came from a smaller organization that had been financially devastated by an employee discrimination lawsuit, filed by a woman who claimed she was denied promotions because she rejected a boss's romantic overtures. Jim believed that the boss had not made these overtures and that the woman had fabricated her story, but it caused him to play the Window Watcher game at his new company. In this instance, Sara, one of the direct reports he inherited, was sixty-two years old, and Jim thought that she wasn't pulling her weight. At the same time, Jim viewed this employee as potentially vengeful and didn't want to fire her and risk a lawsuit. Jim assigned her to a project that would take over a year to complete and removed her from the day-to-day operations of Jim's unit. To make this move happen, Jim had to spend a lot of time convincing his own boss that Sara had the skills that were necessary to the project, and he had to fill out a great deal of paperwork generated by HR. Even worse, it left Jim one person short of a full team, negatively impacting their productivity.

L7. Divide and Conquer

In Divide and Conquer, the boss deliberately pits subordinates against each other in order to maintain or consolidate power. The boss may also divide what his subordinates control, reducing their staffs, their sales territories, or their responsibilities in order to prevent a challenge to his influence or even his job.

Example: A CEO was concerned about the potentially powerful alliance between the head of Research and the head of the company's main division. She instructed the head of Research (who reported to the division head) to have weekly one-on-one conversations with her, and insisted that he was not to share the substance of these meetings with the division head. The CEO knew that word of these meetings would reach the division head and that it would create a wedge between the division head and the Research head.

L8. Scapegoat

Scapegoat is a bit different from the interpersonal Blame game, in that when leaders scapegoat, they do so to avoid taking the heat for an organizational program that is in trouble (rather than as a way to target an internal rival). Many times, managers set up consultants as scapegoats, communicating that a project's demise or a strategic misstep was the fault of a consultant who was involved with it in some way.

Example: A productivity program was successful (in the sense that the target numbers were exceeded) but hugely unpopular in a global consumer goods organization. One of the Big Five consulting firms had been brought in to orchestrate the program. The CEO was happy to take the savings the program produced, but he was not willing to accept responsibility for how the program hurt morale and resulted in the loss of some key personnel. As a result, the CEO fired the consulting group, maintained that their recommendations resulted in the morale problems, and hired another consulting group to investigate the "misdeeds" of the first one.

Budget Games

B1. Sandbagging

Sandbagging is played in two forms: by managers who have a P&L responsibility and by managers who have cost center responsibility. In the first case, managers purposely lowball sales forecasts as a negotiating ploy. Headquarters, knowing that this is a common practice (as they themselves were managers before and used to play this game), engage in a sequence of negotiations, losing trust in their managers' real judgment and often coercing the managers to accept a top-down number at the end of negotiations. In the second form, managers purposely present a higher budget than actually required, to start negotiations. This game creates "victimized" managers who don't feel totally accountable for the budget and may even try to demonstrate that they were right in the first place.

Example: Paolo, a very experienced leader, now the country manager of a global generics company in Russia, realized that the country generics market was booming and that he could easily grow sales by more than 70 percent the following year. Of course, it was still an unstable business environment, and any new government regulation could cause an abrupt slowdown in marketplace growth. He had also seen what happened to a colleague who delivered sales growth that was "below expectations" (despite all his efforts).

Paolo presented a modest forecast including 25 percent growth, much above the average 15 percent company growth, but below his real potential. After some back-and-forth with his boss, the head of emerging markets, they agreed to a forecast of 35 percent growth, which Paolo exceeded by 5 percent. His achievement guaranteed a fat bonus for him and his team, but it was much below the 70 percent he could have gone for.

B2. Slush Fund

To play Slush Fund when discussing the following year's budget, a manager mislabels one section, creating a secret surplus to cope with overspending. The problem with this game is that it encourages managers to play fast and loose with their budgets, draining money from the corporate coffers that they might not need. It also sets a bad precedent, communicating that budgets are not to be taken at face value and that playing games with them isn't just optional but necessary. Management eventually begins to suspect that managers are playing this game, and they begin questioning every line item in the budget, wasting enormous energy debating with managers whether item *x* is really necessary. Sometimes the slush fund even needs to be spent unnecessarily just to avoid questioning.

Example: Marcia, a midlevel manager at a consumer electronics company, routinely included an item in her budget labeled "special projects." Although Marcia would occasionally have a special project for which she needed money, she always allotted more money for special projects than she anticipated requiring. She rationalized this game by telling trusted colleagues that if she didn't have this slush fund, she would invariably go over budget, be chastised by her bosses, and be told that she needed to do a better job of watching her spending. "My way," she said, "I stay in management's good graces and make sure my department is properly funded."

B3. Lowballed Baseline

In Lowballed Baseline, a manager steps into a new role—after joining the company or after being transferred or promoted—and immediately starts telling people that the department is in bad shape financially. By disparaging his predecessor, he sets low expectations that he is able to meet or exceed, thus appearing to have "turned things around." Some managers are highly skilled at playing this game, shading the facts just enough that their pessimistic projections feel accurate. They may well enlist others in this game, encouraging their direct reports to help them slant the facts negatively. A great deal of effort goes into creating this low baseline, and therefore not much effort has to be expended on actual work, as anything above the baseline will be considered a success.

Example: Elena was a new manager who joined a company that had just gone through an acquisition, and she was given a position of responsibility within the acquired group. Elena declared that the unit was a "mess"—that given its structure, its personnel, and its products, there was no way it could come close to the CFO's financial projections for it. She seized on one negative factor—that a few people resigned after the acquisition—and talked about how these were "indispensable" individuals and that the loss of their knowledge and expertise would make it impossible to operate effectively until new people were hired and trained. In fact, the people who left were B and C players, but Elena did a masterful job of portraying them as A players.

B4. Quarterly Earnings

The Quarterly Earnings game is the attempt to meet the analysts' collective expectations or exceed them by only a penny in terms of quarterly earnings. This game produces a lot of decisions about what to book or not in a quarter and what to actually do in a quarter. (It also spawns a lot of other budget games.) As a result, organizations focus a great deal of time and effort on delivering the results that are right for analysts rather than the results that are best for the organization.

Example: Abbud, the country head of a cosmetics company in Peru, was promised a huge stock option grant if his organization achieved the sales growth estimated for the year. Unfortunately, November coming, Abbud realized that he was going to run short of the target by 5 percent. He called Jordan, his head of sales, and instructed him to negotiate a special discount with a few key customers if they agreed to buy 25 percent more than their average order. Playing the Quarterly Earnings game, Abbud achieved his target and compensation, at the expense of the company's profitability and the following year's first-quarter sales.

A Range of Attitudes: Game Consciousness

Don't assume that everyone plays these games with the same mind-set. Whereas some people are fully aware that they are engaged in manipulative behaviors whereby they win and others (including the organization) lose, in many cases they have little or no consciousness that they're playing games.

Even when they have been playing these games habitually for years, they wouldn't categorize their behavior as having anything to do with games. Typically, people with relatively low game consciousness only "glimpse" the game. It is difficult to glimpse a game if it involves behaving in a way that is similar to how they've acted all their lives. For instance, if they've always been a nitpicker and a finger pointer, the Gotcha game will feel like second nature, and they won't identify it as a game. If, in contrast, they have always been loath to point out people's mistakes and this is a game that is popular at their organizations, they are much more likely to glimpse it. They may not tell themselves they're playing a game, but they will be aware that they are engaged in an uncomfortable pattern of behavior endorsed by a company's culture.

People who receive and are receptive to feedback are more likely to have higher game consciousness. Your direct reports are especially attuned to your behaviors, and if you create the right environment for them to give you feedback, they will tell you if they perceive that you're afraid to say anything negative to them about their performance (No Bad News game) or that you reflexively copy other executives on e-mails (Copy game). If you encourage and listen to this feedback, you're likely to be a self-aware individual who knows the games to which you are vulnerable. This is one of the ways in which companies can start to mitigate game-playing behavior; we will look at others later in the book.

Understand, too, that game consciousness tends to be a reverse evolutionary process. By this we mean that when people join companies, they are often highly aware of the new ways of doing things in their particular companies, and they know that these norms are different from what they're used to.

In their own minds, they see a particular new behavior as a way to get ahead or play politics. Over time, however, this behavior becomes the norm, and their awareness that they're engaged in a type of game diminishes. They essentially are absorbed into the new culture.

The same holds true for veteran employees who find themselves with a new boss or CEO who introduces new elements into the culture; at first these "foreign" ways of doing things may appear game-like or overly political. Again, over time, playing these games becomes the norm, and people lose their awareness of them.

In any company, a small group of people exists on each of the far ends of the consciousness continuum. On one end, there are a minority of Machiavellian types who relish manipulating others, suboptimizing their groups for their personal gain, and making a given game or games habitual behaviors, all the while believing that this is just corporate reality. On the other end are people who abhor games, who are constantly looking for ways to improve, and who would rather resign than stay in an organization where games run rampant.

The majority of employees, though, are in the middle of the continuum, glimpsing that they're sometimes engaging in games but not fully aware of that fact.

The person who is on the game-conscious end of the continuum is unusually transparent and authentic. What you see is what you get. Rarely does this individual have hidden agendas. She possesses a genuine quality that invites trust and open communication. When she wants direct reports to work harder or better, she doesn't resort to the manipulative actions that are part and parcel of all games. Instead, she attempts to rally them around a worthy cause or objective, using her passion and commitment to encourage others to excel. She is not averse to asking for help when she needs it or admitting her own fears and doubts when she has them.

Although it's possible that this manager may unknowingly be drawn into a game others play, she won't play it for long. As soon as she becomes aware of what she's doing, she'll disengage or at least try to manage this behavior. She takes pride in choosing how to behave in a given situation rather than being controlled by the game routine.

In an article titled "Level 5 Leadership," Jim Collins (2005) suggests that great leaders combine "humility and fierce resolve." These are apt terms for leaders who avoid game playing. Their humility prevents them from resorting to games to flex their position power muscle or achieve personal goals at the expense of organizational ones. At the same time, they achieve great things through inspiration and perspiration rather than manipulation. This approach has a positive impact on both people and organizations, unlike game playing, the negative impact of which we will discuss in Chapter Two.