

Game Playing in an Organisational Setting

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For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to examine game playing from a Transactional Analysis perspective as appropriate to my business career generally and the transport industry specifically. I think that in this industry people can lend themselves to the following games; ‘Ain’t it awful’ in general and ‘Water Cooler’ or ‘Coffee Break’ in particular and I would also surmise a fair degree of ‘Nowadays’; I see ‘Schlemiel’ also being played in ways I will describe later. All of these games are discussed in Berne (1964, pp96-99).

Water Cooler or Coffee Break

A three handed game favoured by both the unionised workforce, non-managerial office staff and mid level management all favouring the past time slogan of ‘Look what they are doing to us now’ aimed usually at the next level in the hierarchy (They). This is played by employees across the range of time spent in the organization. Longer-term employees can continue the depressive position of the ongoing them of suppression from the often ever-changing faces of upper management. Newer employees introducing the variation of they are all the same because ‘At my last job they did this to us’- that’s why I left; thus confirming ‘They’ to a much wider and darker societal wide conspiracy that includes other corporations and governments.

Nowadays

Another three handed variation of AIA favoured by the above-mentioned participants; unionised workforce, non-managerial office staff and mid level management. The variant in the participants being that generally this game is favoured by long term employees who love the pastime reminiscences of ‘the good old days’ when discussing their views of the shortcomings of current management’s capability specifically and overall organisational direction and culture in general (Nowadays). Despite having no practical experience of ever having filled a role with the responsibilities and pressures faced at the next level this does not diminish the self-righteous payoff.

Schlemiel

Favoured by the unionised workforce, is a two handed game played with management, although played at a second degree level it can sometimes become a three way game involving Industrial Commissions as the third player. Often the workforce in this industry is made up of stable, long standing employees. Through the length of their tenure they have usually watched a procession of managers with widely varying competence come and go at quite frequent intervals. The participants favour this game as a way to capitalise upon the opportunities offered by these frequent changes in management. They use ‘Schlemiel’ to even out the balance of power in the relationship by capitalising on both the knowledge and experience that is lost in this turnover as well as the

management vacuum associated with the periods of departure, transition and settling in that can stretch over months. The union play the role of destructive/disruptive children with management being the forgiving understanding parent.

The disruptive child role is played out by the union indulging in activities that openly and defiantly interrupt the business such as strikes, go slows, work bans, etc usually in the name (social level) of some self serving cause be it more pay, better conditions, safety, etc. Management's usual response is to placate in whatever way possible the behaviour in order to minimise the impact on the business and its customers in both the short and long term. This usually results in a compromise or granting of the workforces wants thus confirming to both union and management who really is in charge of the business.

The Four Myths

Stewart and Joines (1987) discuss Kahler's four myths, which underlie drivers and rackets. These myths consist of two pairs, with one of each pair coming from parent the other being a child response.

I will analyse the transactions involved in 'Schlemiel' as outlined above in my former profession of logistics management, in an attempt to examine the responses of the players from the perspective of these Four Myths.

Firstly lets look at Myths One and Two described as;

'I can make you feel good by doing your thinking for you' – Negative nurturing parent

A position ideally favoured by management but rarely achieved. This is a controlling position in an attempt to obtain the line of least resistance that management would love to maintain to allow easy achievement of personal and corporate goals. Assuming a social paradigm of adult to adult 'I know what's best for you so leave it up to me', with the psychological paradigm of the negative nurturing parent as above 'I can make you feel good by doing your thinking for you', coming from a need to control the business to protect their personal interests firstly and those of the organization secondly.

'You can make you feel good by doing my thinking for me' – Adapted Child

This is a position that the workforce would ideally like to believe in response to the above social message. Indeed on the infrequent occasions when they are exposed to competent, fair and trustworthy management over a sustained period, they can allow themselves to exist in with some comfort. This exhibits a group need both socially and psychologically for good nurturing parenting or in this case leadership/management.

The unions play 'Schlemiel' when trust in the psychological message from management (NNP) above is either never achieved or is diluted in some way. Incoming management is usually viewed as untrustworthy and or incompetent unless proven otherwise. Therefore after the briefest of honeymoon periods, if at all, if the unionised workforce feels any discomfort 'Schlemiel' will start usually by way of disruptive behaviours that are tried and tested such as strikes or go slows or other industrial action as a way of delivering the psychological message to new management of 'just letting you know we run things around here not you'. The cycle of this game is further enhanced for the union by the frequent turnover of management, thus allowing them to recycle old issues or causes with a new and frequently naive partner.

Dilution of the trust with longer term management will usually occur when they (management) try to take steps to further improve the bottom line or attempt to win back previous monetary or productivity losses sustained from earlier games of ‘Schlemiel’, once this is attempted, so the signal starts for a whole new round of the game. This thus sets in motion the switch for management from rescuer to victim and the union from victim to persecutor, with the payoffs being that management has the unions to blame for their inability to run the business just as his predecessor did and unions getting justification in the anger of their injustice at management daring to try and run things.

Myths three and four are described as thus.

‘I can make you feel bad by what I say to you’ – Negative Controlling Parent

Management who favour an authoritative style of management over a more consultative one may adopt the above position out of the belief that this will work in controlling the workforce. This may be the approach of a new management regime in a clumsy response to deal with the ongoing game of ‘Schlemiel’ that probably cost his predecessor his job. The social message being adult to adult ‘I’m the boss and therefore control your destiny’ with the psychological message of ‘Do as I say or the consequences will be very harsh’

‘You can make me feel bad by what you say to me’ – Negative Adaptive Child

The unions don’t believe this myth and will respond from this position (NAC) to the above (NCP) for only the briefest of periods from hours to days at the most or in the case of seasoned and confident union officials never. In response to any such threat either social or psychological ‘Schlemiel’ of one degree or another will begin. Once again starting the game cycle and probably ending, depending on the pressures on senior management or from customers for improved service or financial results, either years or months later with new management. The switch in this game of ‘Schlemiel’ occurs with management moving from persecutor to victim swapping positions with the unionised workforce. The payoffs again for management is in being able to blame the ‘militant and highly unionised workforce’ for the woes of the business it is unable to effectively manage, with the unions being able to enjoy their power at the expense of management, the business as a whole and the long suffering customer.

Discounts Involved.

Looking at the possible discounts involved from the perspective of the drama triangle I would surmise the following.

In relation to myths one and two; management in adopting the position of Rescuer is discounting the workforce as capable of making a positive contribution as a mature partner in the business, instead casting them as one below or totally self interested in their own goals and not those of the business unit or organisation as a whole. In discussing the Drama Triangle, Stewart and Joines (1987, p 236-237) suggest that the taking of a position on the triangle involves discounts not only of the other but also of the self. In this case managements self discount may be that they are incapable of dealing with the relationship on an equal partner basis and so move to the inauthentic behaviour of rescuing.

From the union perspective in showing a desire to fill the Victim role if conditions were favourable, would be a discounting of themselves also as being capable of being equal partners. A further sign to this thinking is that in accepting the Rescuing role taken by management it also discounts belief in any ability management may have to be equal partners also.

The discounts underlining this relationship are further clarified when we look also at the passive behaviours both sides adopt in managing this relationship. These four passive behaviours are discussed in Stewart and Joines (1987, p175-177). Unions can quickly move from the passive position of doing nothing to contribute to the relationship allowing management to be the benevolent authority, to agitation if things begin to sour in their minds. This agitation quite literally is expressed in disruptive industrial behaviour with go slows, safety issues, stop work meetings progressing through to incapacitation in not being able to deal with the situation and therefore withdrawing their labour. On the other side of the relationship we have management overadapting by assuming total responsibility for the relationship.

Interruption of the Games

Ways that 'Schlemiel' could be interrupted in my former professions environment would be firstly quite simply as Stewart and Joines (1987, p254) suggest stepping off the drama triangle. In this scenario it would entail management refusing to assume the role of either Rescuer or Persecutor, rather acting as a partner in the business with its employees and encouraging its workforce to do the same – be an equal partner. Further, the game can be interrupted when faced with industrial action by having the strength of will not to assume the favoured role (Persecutor then Victim) but encourage an Adult to Adult resolution of the issues often referred to in business circles as a win-win negotiation strategy. I can state from experience that this can work in even the most militant of workforces with a strong willed persistence from management to change.

Secondly, Karpman as discussed in Stewart and Joines (1987, p69) suggests using options to choose to break out of familiar, locked transactions with others. I like his suggestion of switching to another ego response when confronted by the usual invitation to assume positions on the triangle or start a game of 'Schlemiel'. For example I have a fantasy of back in the old days when being subjected to a union demand for lets say extra pay for example of moving into free child and responding along the lines of "What only 10% more, you deserve 15% at least probably 20%", whilst falling to the floor, it would have been very interesting to see what happened next.

I have found this paper to be very enlightening both in terms of an understanding of games from a TA practitioner perspective. However, maybe more surprisingly seeing the games that were being played in my old work environment, whilst I had an understanding that they were games we were playing and did with some success break role patterns it was done from instinct and fairness rather than any sophisticated understanding of human behaviour theory.

References and Reading

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