

By Andrew Day and Sophy Pern, April 2024

**Client:** *'This is not how people feel.'*

**Consultant:** *'I'm not sure what you mean. This is what they told us.'*

**Client:** *'You spoke to the wrong people.'*

**Consultant:** *'We spoke to the people you identified.'*

**Client:** *'I know this is not what people believe happened. Your summary is skewed by a few individuals with vested interests to complain about management. You don't make this clear.'*

**Consultant:** *'We have tried to set out what we were told as clearly and accurately as we could.'*

**Client:** *'You seem to be blaming management for the problems.'*

**Consultant:** *'We feel everyone is implicated and is struggling to hear each other.'*

**Client:** *'I disagree. When people behave so unreasonably what can we do?'*



This exchange took place between one of us and our client after we had shared with them feedback from their teams on a difficult and highly contested change to working practices. At the end of it, we were left feeling misunderstood, somewhat bemused and criticised (after all we were only trying to help!). Following the meeting we had indirect feedback that suggested our client was not happy with us, but it was not clear precisely why or in what way.

Tricky interactions, such as the above, are not uncommon in attempts to develop organisations. To understand them, the two of us have spent the best part of a year inquiring into the dynamics of our relationships with clients. We share some of the findings from these inquiries in a related article "Dancing in the Triangle".

Through this process, we have become aware of the prevalence of what the field of Transactional Analysis calls 'game playing'<sup>1</sup>. The classic way of understanding games is through the careful analysis of what the psychiatrist Eric Berne called 'transactions'.

These are relational exchanges that communicate both conscious and unconscious messages that are intended to avoid difficulties and pain. They often lead however to unhealthy outcomes for both the organization and the individuals involved.

We have observed that in change processes, 'games' are often played between issue holders who have some authority in the client system ('clients'), 'helpers' (often internal or external consultants or staff representatives such as HR or Strategy) and those affected by changes. They are characterised by avoidant patterns of inauthentic communication and defensive reasoning<sup>1</sup> as each party seeks evidence to confirm their current ways of seeing the world and reject information that is inconsistent with it<sup>1</sup>. This creates ambiguity around roles, boundaries and contracts (i.e. who wants what from whom).

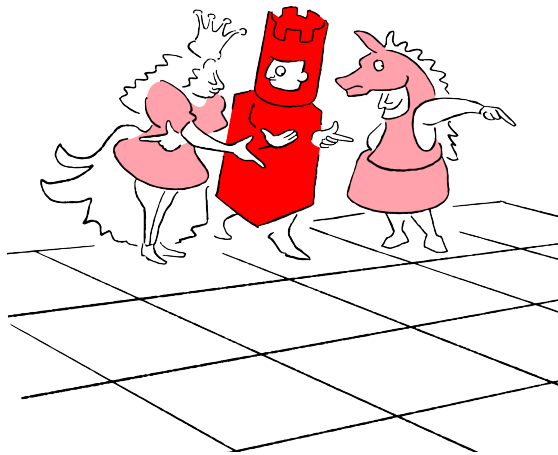
Games can only be played out if all parties are complicit at some level. The upshot of game playing is that one or all parties find themselves set up to fail in their attempts to bring about a desired change.

<sup>1</sup> In transactional analysis this is referred to as 're-defining' (Mellor and Schiff, 1975).

## Why do games emerge in OD initiatives?

We believe that the prevalence of 'game playing' in organisation development processes is because 'clients' often start with ambivalent feelings about change and carry some unrealistic expectations about how others can or need to help them. This tends to reflect underlying feelings of threat and vulnerability within the client system, such as shame, embarrassment or feeling inadequate. The game is an attempt to sidestep such uncomfortable and unwanted feelings.

Often the organisation's culture plays a role in setting up the game. Strong implicit cultural messages typically impede authentic communication around these vulnerabilities or fears. For instance, in one of our clients we encountered a strong belief that leaders needed to be emotionally sorted and in control. When they encountered uncertainty and risk, leaders were unwilling to acknowledge that they did not know what to do, resulting in a tendency to focus on known technical problems whilst turning away from significant and long-term challenges that were more ambiguous and unpredictable.



At their heart, games play out around the dynamics of power and responsibility (and co-dependency) between different actors. While working on the presenting issue or change need, those in helping roles (and clients) are often trying to meet their unresolved needs from earlier life experiences, such as a need for power and significance, affirmation and love,

<sup>2</sup> A state of being whereby our response is based on our historical experience that has its origins in childhood.

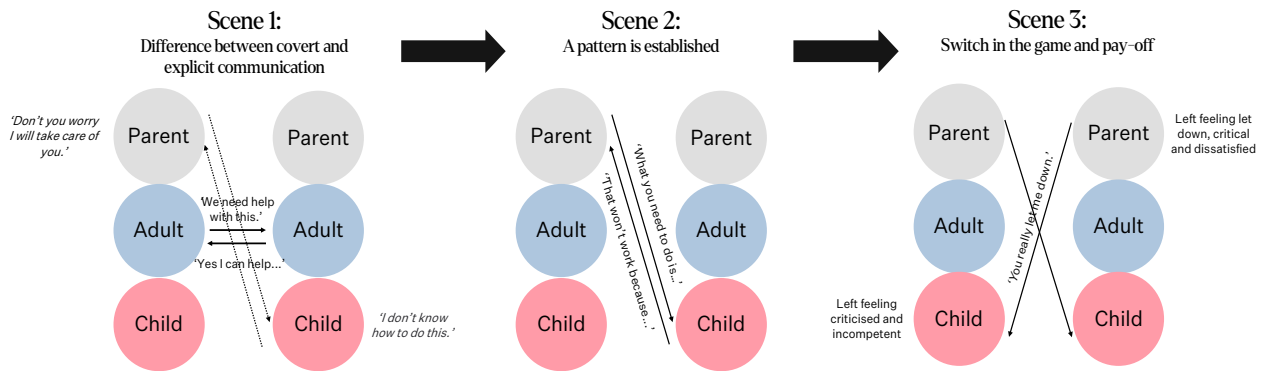
etc. These unresolved needs often reflect introjected messages from parental figures, such as 'be responsible', 'don't let people down', 'be capable' etc.

## The nature of games

In his seminal book, 'The Games People Play', Eric Berne described how a 'game' tends to consist of the following moves:

- An invitation from one of the parties to play the game that contains an explicit, apparently Adult message – such as '*can you help me change the culture of ...*' and an implicit, covert message, such as: '*Please fix my problem .... and rescue me from my difficulty*'. The covert or ulterior message tends to be from a Child Ego State<sup>2</sup>.
- A response by the other party that is an acceptance of the invitation at the explicit and covert levels, such as: 'I'd be happy to help with that – I have done a lot of effective work in this area' with the ulterior message of: '*Don't you worry, I will take care of you*'. This covert message tends to be from a Parent Ego State<sup>3</sup>.
- A series of complementary transactions that creates a pattern ('*what should I do?*', '*this will work*', '*what should I do now?*', '*I'd recommend...*', '*Now what?*',.... and so on). Such complementary transactions tend to be played out between Parent and Child Ego States.
- A sudden switch in the pattern of transactions (technically referred to as a negative 'crossed' transaction<sup>iii</sup>), such as: '*I thought you said you knew what to do!*'. At this point the transaction is reversed with the client taking up a Parent Ego state and the 'helper' moving into a Child Ego State.
- An unexpected and confusing ending, known as a 'pay-off', whereby both parties are left feeling 'not-ok' (e.g. misunderstood, not 'good enough' and criticised).

<sup>3</sup> When our response reflects an introjected messages from parental or other authority figures.



## Archetypal games in organisation change initiatives

We have identified several archetypal ‘games’ that can play out during organisational change initiatives. The four most common being:

1. ‘Why don’t you – Yes But’ (YDYYB)
2. ‘Cover your arse’ (CYA)
3. ‘Let’s compete’ (LC)
4. ‘Turning a blind eye’ (TBE)

We have used simple descriptions below to aid illustration. In practice, their dynamics may appear more complex and involve multiple players. There are, no doubt, many other games that get played.

### 1. ‘Why don’t you – Yes But’

This is a classic game first identified by Eric Berne. The basic structure of the game can be summarised in the following way:

**Invitation:** One of the parties presents a problem that *implies* they want help or advice.

**Response:** Another party, often an internal or external consultant, (‘the helper’) offers some form of practical advice: ‘*You could try doing ...*’

**Pattern:** The problem holder responds along the lines of: ‘*That work won’t work because...*’. The other parties respond by offering other suggestions. This is met with a similar response of ‘*that work won’t work because...*’ or ‘*We tried that last year and it didn’t work*’. And so on and so forth.

**Switch:** The problem holder responds with criticism or rejection of the ‘helper’.

**Possible pay-off:** The problem holder has their helplessness confirmed and the ‘the helper’ is left feeling frustrated and angry, incompetent and/or helpless.

### 2. ‘Cover your arse’

The essence of this game is for everyone to avoid getting blamed for the problem or difficulty. Again, the game is played out around feelings of responsibility, with whoever takes on the problem ultimately being set up to fail. This game can be lucrative for external consultancies as clients may be willing to part with lots of money in exchange for the abdication of their responsibility.

**Invitation:** Usually starts with the ‘client’ asking for assurance that the problem can/will be solved. In doing so, they invite another party to step in and take responsibility for the problem. This could be a consultant, subordinate, HR Director etc. Significant emphasis is usually placed on the expertise of the helper e.g. by reinforcing other cases where they have been successful (‘You are really the expert at this’, ‘you have the resources available’).

**Response:** The invitation is accepted and the other player takes ownership of the problem but feels uncomfortable with the ‘hot potato’. The client has now off-loaded their problem, thereby abdicating most or all of the responsibility.

**Pattern:** A game of pass the parcel then ensues with responsibility and the discomfort being given to another party who does not have sufficient authority or responsibility to act.

**Switch:** Someone steps in and blames the person who is holding the 'hot potato' for the failure of the project.

**Possible pay-off:** The client gets to feel that they have been let down and those who have taken responsibility are left feeling indignant, incompetent or rejected.

### 3. 'Let's compete'

In this game the client sets up different parties, for instance internal and external consultants, to compete against each other. The basic structure of the game can be summarised in the following way:

**Invitation:** The client requests help for from one party whilst at the same time making a different but overlapping request of another party.

**Response:** Both parties accept the invitation whilst overlooking the significance of the request given to the other party.

**Pattern:** The two parties get on with their work without acknowledging the competing request or overlaps between their projects. Each tries to outperform the other or make a stronger argument for why theirs is more important.

**Switch:** The game typically ends with the client siding with one party and rejecting the other or rejecting both parties (i.e. all have failed). One party may take a one-up position and criticise the other party to the client (*'They do not add any value', 'I don't rate them', etc.*).

**Possible pay-off:** The client can blame one or more individuals or groups. The 'helpers' can feel either one up or one down in the game of competition.

### 4. 'Turning a blind eye'

This game revolves around the desire of the client system to deny or overlook a difficulty that will have uncomfortable consequences. All players are expected to collude with this denial.

**Invitation:** Someone in power sets out a desired and aspirational future (e.g. 'we need to become an innovative organisation') and asks for a plan for how this can be achieved. This request makes no reference to a significant difficulty or problem that exists (e.g. high levels of fear and low trust).

**Response:** The 'helper' agrees to draw up a plan (e.g. 'We can use Appreciative Inquiry ....') thereby buying into the implicit assumption that the aspirational future can be realised without surfacing or acknowledging any difficulties.

**Pattern:** Those involved focus on executing the plan without acknowledging or talking about the 'elephant in the room'. This may require some elaborate and nimble footwork to find ways of not seeing or talking about what is really going on.

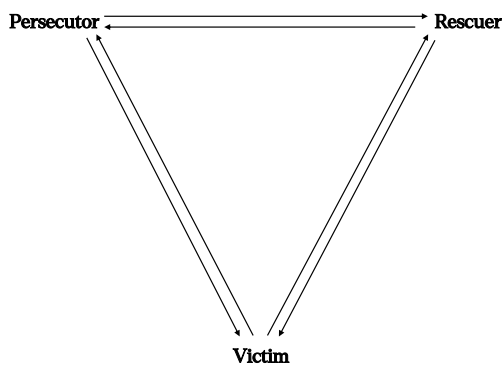
**Switch:** The 'client', participants or an external body, such as the Board or regulator, complain that the initiative is a waste of everyone's time, and nothing has changed.

**Possible pay-off:** The underlying difficulty can be avoided and any negative feelings are put onto the 'helper' or another party who in effect become a scapegoat.

## The drama triangle

Another way of representing these games is Stephen Karpman's drama triangle<sup>iv</sup>. In a game, one or more party finds themselves feeling like a 'Victim' (*'poor me'*) with another being perceived to be the Persecutor (a critical, one-up position).

The Victim (*'I have this problem, I can't solve'*) invites someone to step into a Rescuer role (*'Why don't you...'*). As the game develops the different parties find themselves switching roles. The Rescuer (*'Let me help you'*) starts to feel they are the Victim (*'I was only trying to help'*) and Victim becomes their Persecutor (*'Do you think I haven't thought of that?'*). The Persecutor at this point might move into the Rescuer role or another player might be brought in to take up this position.



The drama triangle may end in an abrupt and unhealthy manner with all players feeling dissatisfied and feeling that their needs have not been met. For example, in one case we came across, an internal consultant acted 'as if' they were the client and resisted all requests by the external consultant to contract with the 'actual' client. This game ended with the actual client (on the first occasion they met) attacking the external during a workshop for not addressing their needs. The external team was scapegoated and rejected.

## Possible endings – resolutions and fallings out

Games either come to a healthy, or somewhat healthy, resolution or end in an unhealthy manner. The former necessitates a move by

one or more parties stepping out of the game, for example, by shifting from a parent or child ego state to adult and engaging in a more direct conversation around what is happening in the relationship. For instance, after the first major intervention of a complex assignment an external consulting team initiated a review with an internal consulting team about how they were working together which allowed for the airing of frustrations on both sides around specific patterns of communication.

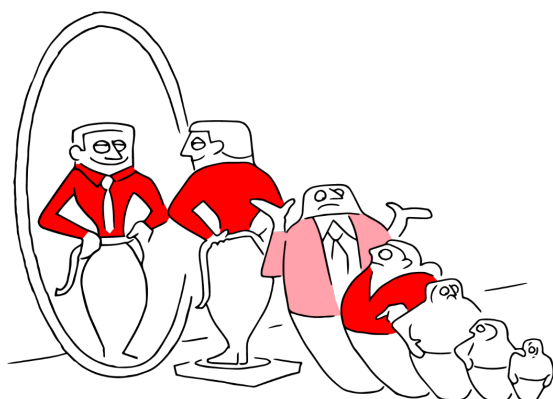
The externals felt that the internals were being overly deferential and avoidant with the client system. The internals however felt that the externals did not appreciate the political difficulties they faced and the need to be responsive to requests from their leadership. The review did not immediately resolve the difficulties, however, it led to a clearer understand of how the two parties needed to work together.

Unhealthy endings include the early termination of projects, scapegoating, individuals getting fired and clients feeling dissatisfied about the outcomes from the assignment. Most OD practitioners or staff professionals can remember moments in their careers when an assignment ended with them feeling 'not-ok'. For instance, several years ago, one of the authors ran a development event for a relatively new leadership team. The HR Director asked the consultant for help with supporting them to form as a team without indicating that the team had any internal difficulties. They said they could not afford the proposed approach and ask if the consultant would do the work without speaking to the team members in advance. The consultant (to their later regret) accepted the invitation to step into the role of Rescuer. In practice however the team members were highly critical of each other yet unwilling to express their criticisms. In the session itself, the consultant tried hard to encourage the team to explore their difficulties however none of his invitations were taken up.

The following day the HR Director sent an email that they felt let down and that the team was highly critical of how they had run the session. Everyone involved was left feeling 'not-ok'. The consultant was left feeling unfairly criticised, used and a bit bemused and the internal team were left frustrated and dissatisfied.

## Identifying and getting out of the 'game'

To get out of a game, the first step is to recognise that one is in one. We tend to sense when we are in a game because we do not feel our usual selves. Our embodied responses (such as fear, tension, etc.) therefore can help us to recognise that things are not quite what they seem. Alternatively, one might feel disturbed in a way that is both odd and yet familiar (because we do have proclivities for certain games linked to our own scripts<sup>v</sup>).



The second step is to understand the nature of the game. One framework for doing this is the John James 'Game Plan'<sup>vi</sup> that was adapted by Laurence Collinson. By asking ourselves the following questions we can get clearer on the nature of the game and our role within it.

- What keeps happening over and over again in my relationship with X?
- How does it start?
- What happens next?
- What is my/our secret message to the other person?
- And then?
- What is the other person's secret message to me/us?
- How does it end?
- How do I/we feel?
- How do I think X (the other person) feels?

It is also worth considering what is the ulterior message and the pay-off for each party in playing the game or, in other words, what is the avoided issue that leads into the game and

what does the outcome perpetuate (rather than resolve).

Once we have any understanding of the dynamic and our part in it then we could try one or more of the following<sup>4</sup>:

- Changing our behaviour in a way that disrupts the dynamic and crosses the transaction. Transactional analysis argues that a dynamic changes when the communication pattern is crossed and the pattern is disrupted. This could be done by switching ego states by for instance moving to Adult, Nurturing or Controlling Parent or Free Child. For instance, you might shift from an Adapted Child or compliant state to an Adult Ego State by saying something like: *'I am not clear on what you specifically need right now'*.
- Responding directly to the implicit, covert psychological message by acknowledging the underlying fear or need e.g. *'I sense that you are worried about what will happen and want some protection in this situation'*.
- Noticing what information or options you might be discounting and questioning what you can do to get your needs met. For instance, during a meeting a senior client leaves the room. The consultant feels that they cannot do anything other than carry on. On reflection, a different intervention would be *'I notice that person A left the room and I don't know what to make of that in your culture. In order to work well with you I need to understand what's going on?'*
- Recognising and letting go of what you might be getting out of the game that is not helpful, such as being able to blame others, a sense of superiority, self-righteousness, feeling sorry for yourself, etc. This often requires changing one's internal dialogue and resisting the urge to 'point score' in conversation.
- Stepping out of the 'game' by moving to intimacy by sharing how you feel about the situation e.g. *'We seem to be getting into a familiar back and forth where I am trying to persuade you to do something you don't want to do'*.

<sup>4</sup> With special thanks to Charlotte Sills for her teachings and materials.

## Avoiding game playing

The antidote to games is to invite Adult-Adult interactions in which responses are based on the 'here and now' rather than more archaic experiences.

### This involves:

- Recognising our needs and taking responsibility for getting them met (and noticing when we are complaining about others for not meeting our needs),
- Noticing when we are being invited into a game and not accepting the invitation,
- Regular and explicit contracting around expectations, needs and roles,
- Establishing intimacy and trust with others through direct, explicit and open communication of facts, feelings and assumptions,

- Sense-making with representatives of the client system to understand systemic tension and dilemmas,
- Knowing ourselves and the games we have a tendency to play with others.

## Conclusion

Much attention in efforts to develop organisations focus on rational-logical strategies (i.e. changes to strategies, processes and structures). Our inquiry suggests however that success lies primarily in recognising the covert, psychological transactions and inauthentic communication that serves to avoid responsibility and threatening feelings. Our analyses while simplified, hopefully highlight the essence of some of the dysfunctional dynamics that underlie attempts to change organisations.

## Bibliography

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<sup>iii</sup> Lapworth, P., & Sills, C. (2011). *An Introduction to Transactional Analysis: Helping People to Change*. Sage Publications.

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<sup>v</sup> Steiner, M (1974) *Scripts People Live*. New York Gove Press

<sup>vi</sup> James, J (1973). The Game Plan. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 3 (4), 14-17.