



This is October 2009's newsletter, Changing Organisations, for my clients and other professionals interested in organisational change.

This month's [changingorganisations](#) is in two parts:

- Why Business is Not Like Sports As We Know It
- Hot off the [changingorganisations](#) Blog

## Why Business is Not Like Sports As We Know It

The other day I was in a group that was discussing leadership, including the similarities between business and sports. No doubt you've seen similar comparisons before – business and sports both have winners and losers, a game plan, scouting out the competition, reading the game and changing tactics accordingly, playing within rules, a coach and many other similarities.

The basic assumption is that business is like rugby, chess or my own favourite game, tennis, in which one player or team is playing another player or team.

But in such a game of two players, if one player is much stronger than the other, then that player can pretty much determine the outcome of the game, and will be able to compel to some extent the moves of the other player.

Nevertheless the stronger player still has to take the moves of the weaker player into account even though they have overall dominance of the game. You could say that both players have some power over each other. In this sense, power is not an absolute but a ratio between the two players, a ratio that favours the stronger player. If the players were more equally matched, then the power ratio would be more even and neither player would be able to dominate the course of the game, nor compel the other player to make certain moves.

But business is not like a game of two players like rugby, chess or tennis. It is not even as though one person is simultaneously playing a number of others individually like in simultaneous chess. Nor is one person playing a number of people who are united against him or her. In both of these cases, a player who is much stronger than the others could dominate the course of the game and moves of the others.

Business is not like these games.

## **It's Not One on One**

Business is more like a game for many many players, playing against each other, not one on one like tennis or chess. Individual players then have to wait longer and longer to make their moves. As the number of players increases it becomes more and more difficult for one player to have a mental picture of the overall flow of play, the direction and development of the game. The ability of one player to control the game or compel the moves of others becomes diluted, even for a relatively strong player. From the point of view of an individual player, the network of other players and the moves they make will eventually seem to take on a life of its own as they wait for their turn and try to work out what is happening.

This is what it is like to be a participant in a change initiative, particularly in a large organisation, especially as a member of the group of "targets" of change. From the perspective of an individual involved, the moves (or actions) available to that person have to take into account the moves (or actions) of others, and in this way the people involved have to be responsive to the actions they see happening, and the overall patterns of behaviour, power, politics, and ideology that they discern. Individuals involved, even powerful ones, cannot completely dominate the course of the project and the actions of others.

## **The Number of Players is Always Increasing**

Returning to the game of many players, imagine that the numbers of players keeps increasing. As individuals find themselves less and less able to obtain favourable outcomes, different groupings of players will form and reform as players seek to gain an advantage. Strong players will group together and attempt to attract other players to their groupings. From the interplay of the various groupings, you could end up with a two tier game – a game in which players are still interdependent but no longer play directly with each other. Rather, the function of playing directly is taken up by a tier of leaders, delegates, representatives, governments, focus groups, steering groups or other specially designated functionaries. This first tier of representatives / leaders plays directly with each other, on behalf of the mass of people in the second tier, who now do not play directly with each other. There can be no first tier without the second tier. So the representatives / leaders in the first tier are bound up with the second mass group in one way or another. The first tier cannot exist without the second tier.

Let's assume the first tier is very powerful indeed. In fact, like a senior management team or a change project team, only they can play at the decision making levels - they have a monopoly on access to the game. Every player in that tier can play, pretty much like in a single tier game, being able to see the pattern of the game, decide strategy, make moves directly and follow the influence of his or her moves on the later moves of others. Even though the game is complex through the interdependence of tier one with the mass of people in tier two, the game appears more or less transparent to those players in the top tier.

This transparency is only an illusion however. The two tier game is much more complex than a simple two player game like rugby, chess or tennis, where one strong player is able to dominate the moves of the other player and the course of the game. Because of their interdependence with those in the less powerful tier, no individual in the two tier game, no matter how powerful, has anything like the power of the player in the two person game to guide the game in the direction of his or her desires and wishes.

### **Sports Analogies Trap You into One on One Thinking**

Sports analogies, though, make it appear that those involved in powerful positions in business are like players in the simple one on one games like tennis. These sports analogies ignore the interdependence of each group with the other, the presence of many other groups as well who might not be playing directly, and the complex relationships that are therefore involved.

This is why it is more effective for you as a leader, and also for those involved in change projects, to think of your organisation as a constantly shifting set of ever-changing groupings, rather than being a sport in which the objective is to beat the other team. If you think you are in a simple one on one contest, then you will focus on goals, strategy and tactics. If you think you are part of interdependent groupings with shifting power balances, you will be paying more attention to what is going on around you, to the shifting ratios of power and to the quality of your responses within the framework of your overall intention.

Which is far more effective. So, stop yourself when you find yourself using a sports comparison to describe situations in your organisation. It will be hiding the interdependence of groupings the people you are talking to are part of. Are you aware of what these interdependencies are in your organisation?

Note: These thoughts were inspired by the remarkable ideas of Norbert Elias in "What is Sociology," 1978, New York: Columbia University Press.

### **Hot Off the [changingorganisations](#) Blog**

The other night I had dinner with David Gurteen, who is a knowledge management expert from the UK who is known for the concept of the knowledge café. He has a newsletter that goes to over 16,000 subscribers and has blogged, tweeted and referred to [changingorganisations](#) on several occasions now. Each time he mentions my blog on twitter or his blog, traffic on my blog goes through the roof.

We had emailed a few times but never met until I found out he was touring NZ and took the opportunity to share a delicious meal at Ambeli in Majoribanks St, Wellington. I'll certainly be heading back there. Thanks Dave for a great evening. Dave is very well connected and I came away with some interesting ideas to explore.

This month, the hot topic on the blog was a questioning of personality profiles – are they like astrology, are they trying to measure an inner essence of a person that doesn't exist, and [do you need pants?](#) Here is the link to the [conversation](#).

And again, another record month on the blog in September - eighth month in a row.

## Conclusion

Two new calves finally arrived, they are both black with white faces and they are so cute as they explore their world – learning how to sit down gracefully, how to run down a hill (you have to learn how to stop!) and finding out about a new paddock they've never been in before. I wish you as much joy as the calves seem to have, as you negotiate your world.

Regards,



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