Increase Your Productivity–and Profitability!

Five Games People Play That Ruin Results

By

John R. Stoker

The current economic climate has everyone filled with fear. Government spending is out of control, and the deficit is having devastating effects at home and abroad. Consumer confidence is down, so spending is, at best, "guarded." Corporations won't part with their capital for fear of a tanking global economy. In addition, organizations everywhere have been slashing positions, programs, products, and services because of sustained economic disarray. Everyone is wondering what to do to remain afloat financially.

With organizational and individual confidence at all-time lows, we must remember that organizations don't perform, people do. Individual performance results in productivity, which translates directly into profitability. Improving the bottom-line has far more to do with how people think and interact with each other than what numbers on a spreadsheet reveal. Why? Because spreadsheets don't show how the failure to think and act together impacts profitability.

Individual performance grows out of the conversations we hold. Focused conversations create alignment; alignment creates velocity; and velocity exponentially impacts profitability.

Burdened by the current economic challenges, leaders and managers, now more than ever, need to focus on increasing efficiency and effectiveness by building the capacity of their people to speak up and talk about what's draining the organization's resources and preventing the creation of viable solutions to problems. And yet, how many times have we sat in a room with others where people made suggestions that every one knew wouldn't work, but no one said a word?

Over the years, our research has helped us identify a number of behaviors people engage in rather than talking about what will really solve problems, These behaviors directly impact the vitality and profitability of any organization. We refer to these behaviors as the "games" people play. Unfortunately, the way people "play" these games does more to sabotage results than contribute to the success of the business.

These games are inspired by Chris Argyris' work on "defensive routines"—routines that individuals, leaders, and managers engage in that justify their actions, stifle learning, foster resistance to change, and promote a functional "blindness" that is difficult to overcome.

We know you'll be able to relate to some of the "games" we identify. Relating, though, is the easy part. What is harder is learning to identify these games and having the courage to talk about them in productive ways. But doing so will result in remarkable results that will greatly impact your productivity and profitability.

THE "BUDGET" GAME

The budget game involves the competition and control that stifles cooperation and collaboration through the use of financial resources. This game usually shows up in battles for control that lead to withholding of information and failing to work together in addressing organizational challenges. The budget game may manifest itself in a variety of ways: 'Sandbagging", "Use it or Lose it" or 'Mutually Misrepresenting the Truth."

"Sandbagging" affects how people access the organization's resources or money. Everyone is asked to submit an annual budget, but many "sandbag" or overly inflate the resources they need to run their department and achieve their yearly objectives. They know that after their budgets are approved that Accounting will slash their budget by 20 percent in the third quarter when things get tight.

I've Got Money for That!

While working in corporate America, we had a manager who continually harped on how "tight" the budget was—that there was little money for anything other than what was approved. Consequently, he routinely turned down budget requests from team members. Then, one day someone came up with an idea that would really make our department look good but that would cost several hundred thousand dollars. Without a moment's thought, our manager responded, "I've got money for that!" We were shocked! Everyone sat looking at each other wide-eyed with their mouths agape. Then the lights started going on as everyone realized what our manager had been doing. Unfortunately, his behavior severely impacted his credibility, and trust in his word became nonexistent. What was worse was that his behavior led to others' sandbagging their budgets in the future

Overly-inflating a departmental budget leads to waste and may impact individual productivity and organizational profitability. In fact, sandbagging usually leads to the "Use it or lose it" phenomenon.

At the end of the year, even if a budget surplus exists, managers will spend all of it to justify their requests for the same or an increased amount in the coming year. A friend of ours who owns a large electronics outlet told us that his most profitable month is December. When we asked why, he told us that's the month that everyone shows up to spend what's left of their budget on laptops, printers, and the latest gizmos they don't need. Individuals spend precious resources to justify their annual budget request at the expense of organizational profitability.

Likewise, the budget game shows up as a source of mutual misrepresentation between departments. Such behavior not only leads to mistrust and frustration but it also impacts profitability.

Will the Price Be Right?

In an attempt to win a large contract to produce a customized auto part, Sales bid low on the price of production of the part. They also told the Production Department that the part was a standard one they already produced for another customer. Consequently, Production assumed it would only need to spend about 20 percent of the forecasted budget customizing the part for this potential client. Actually, the price for customizing the part was more like 80 percent of the proposed cost per part. The Production Group thought that Sales was fudging the numbers, so they too inflated the price to produce the part because they didn't want to produce the part at a loss. The irony of this scenario was that both parties were misrepresenting the truth, and they thought neither side knew what they were doing. The result of this mutual misrepresentation was a tug of war over costs that resulted in a loss of the contracts, anger, frustration, and a burgeoning conclusion that neither party could be trusted. Sales lost contracts it should have won, and won contracts that resulted in a loss for the company.

Eventually, we were able help both of these companies openly acknowledge the games they were playing and explore their concerns, perspectives, and challenges. When they finally shared the strategies they used with each other, all sides literally laughed out loud at their own dysfunction. Their inability to share their thinking and talk about their sandbagging took a toll on their organization's profitability. Likewise, our inability to talk to one another also determines how we interact and negatively affects profitability.

THE "SELFISH" GAME

When individuals don't perform up to our expectations, we usually become angry and defensive as we confront them about their deficiencies. Then those being dressed down respond in kind because they feel embarrassed or threatened. . Our emotional reaction and our response in such situations is the result of our attributing negative intent to the other person. Here's an example:

I'm Not Your Secretary!

A group of executives were working diligently in a meeting that was headed for the noon hour. The CEO, Jim, asked if the group would mind working through lunch. Jim then asked Fred to take everyone's lunch order and then ask Amy to order lunch for the group. Amy, an HR generalist in her early twenties, had only been with the company six months. Fred was a manager who has been with the company over 10 years. After getting the orders, Fred stepped out of the meeting and walked into Amy's office.

"Amy, I need you to order lunch for us and bring it into the meeting when it arrives. Here is a list of what everyone wants," Fred offered.

"I am not your secretary, and you are not my boss!" Amy retorted. "Do it yourself!"

"Amy, what's your problem?" Fred retorted.

"YOU are the problem! And I'm not the only one who thinks…." Her voice trailed off as Fred retreated from her office.

When Amy later asked us for assistance in understanding the situation, we had her rehearse the situation, only this time we asked her to share what she was thinking about Fred, but didn't say. Here is some of what she shared.

"Who does Fred think he is? I don't work for him, and I don't need to do what he asks!"

"I need to stop him taking advantage of me!"

"What is my problem? Fred is my problem—the jerk! He thinks he's the Executive VP, but he's not. What an ego!"

We helped Amy recognize that her highly charged emotions and her assumptions about Fred's request came from previously-formed perceptions. She then identified that how she thought about Fred influenced what she said and how she acted in the situation. She also realized that she had not responded as an HR person should. In fact, she identified that she had acted in the way Fred perceived her. She then began to explore a number of different ways she could have chosen to respond.

Shortly thereafter, Fred asked for some assistance in understanding the situation. We asked him to share what he was thinking and didn't say. It sounded like this:

"Whoa! What's wrong with you today? I was just doing what the CEO asked."

"I don't have time for this! And this is the way HR treats people? Maybe we hired the wrong person for this job."

"I'll do it myself and deal with you later. I have to get back to the meeting!"

Fred justified his behavior by blaming Amy, and he was caught off-guard by Amy's defensiveness. By helping Fred think more objectively, he recognized that he *had* treated her as

if he was her boss, and that doing so had contributed to her reaction. We then asked Fred to explore a number of different ways he could have responded to Amy given the situation.

Fred and Amy's ability to surface their thinking and talk candidly about their perceptions and resulting interpretations helped them build the needed respect to improve their professional relationship and find positive ways they could work together going forward.

The ability to raise and talk through "undiscussables" in an effective and respectful manner helps individuals explore issues that directly impact productivity and profitability. Unfortunately, many lack the skills needed to talk about the tough issues. So, instead, they adopt a more "politically prudent" approach in talking about ongoing inefficiencies, poor decisions, missed deadlines, senior executives' pet projects, inappropriate behavior, or lagging results. Most of the time, the way people approach such issues is to talk behind people's backs and engage in various forms of gossip while never confronting the offending party.

So what is the cost of not sharing what you really think about important or pressing issues? Think of all the wasted time, the loss of emotional energy, and the negative attitudes that end up impacting productivity. Everything has a cost, even though it may not show up as a line item on a spreadsheet. Here's an example of what happens when individuals won't address the simplest of issues.

Too Casual for Casual Dress?

One organization we worked with had adopted a casual dress policy. After several months of receiving positive feedback on the new policy, two executives dressed a little too casually for the liking of the other executives. These two typically wore old Pendleton wool shirts and tan Dockers that looked like they had been dried while tied in a knot. We were approached and asked to give feedback to the offending parties. Rather

than take the issue on ourselves, we suggested the executives hold a conversation to provide the necessary feedback. After all, this was an organization that espoused the values of teamwork and individual development. With such values, we assumed that the executives could step up and tell one another in the spirit of respect and personal development that the choice of attire could be improved.

Rather than hold the conversation, the other executives sent out a memo that changed the dress policy for executives, requiring them to wear dress slacks and a tie.

Sure, everyone conformed, but at what cost? Everyone who wasn't a senior executive started talking and wondering why this distinction was made. Some hypothesized that the leaders were trying to distinguish themselves from everyone else—which killed the idea of being one team. Others thought the change in dress was an expression of superiority. Still others scrutinized and worried that it was only appropriate to visit the executive floor if one were dressed in slacks and a tie.

One simple conversation would have saved this company vast amounts of emotional energy and speculation about what was going on with the executives. The unintended consequences of the executives' behavior resulted in lost effort, negative assumptions, and endless speculation. Holding this one conversation would have focused individual energy that could have increased productivity rather than allowing individuals to second-guess a needless change. It was easy for us to understand how the more important issues might never reach the discussion table.

THE "BLAME" GAME

In some ways this game is the opposite of keeping your thoughts and negative assumptions to yourself. The Blame Game is played most frequently when expectations have

not been met and someone wants to know who is at fault. Blaming others is the first level of self-preservation when embarrassment or threat is imminent – and it's the easiest way to avoid responsibility and make the problems all about someone else.

It's Not My Fault

Real estate agents' commissions are determined by the number of homes they sell. But an agent we know found that her check was far short of what she was due. She reported the discrepancy to the office manager. The office manager called the payroll clerk to report the problem. The payroll clerk told the office manager that he would have to take up the discrepancy with the real estate broker who owned the business. The office manager then called the broker to report the mistake in the agent's commission check. The broker told him that he would have to speak with the controller at the regional office. The office manager talked to the controller, who indicated the problem should really be handled by the broker of the agency, but the controller volunteered to handle the issue with the broker. They met and decided the payroll clerk should handle the problem. The controller asked the payroll clerk about the issue and the payroll clerk said, "Oh, that's easy. I can put in a request in a few minutes."

What was going on here? Everyone was blaming someone else. Think of the time and effort expended for a "few-minutes" request. Worse than chasing everyone for answers and wasted time is the ensuing frustration, anger, and lack of goodwill that the office manager and the real estate agent experienced in dealing with the executives. Handling issues such as this detracts from the productivity that could have boosted the bottom line. You see, while the office manager and real estate agent were handling this problem, they weren't out closing deals or talking to potential buyers.

The problem with the blame game is that **no one ends up owning and fixing the problem**. If no one takes ownership, then you are going to continue to fix the same problems over again and again.

Years ago, an associate was working in a company that was struggling to initiate a change in their culture. The company hired an army of very expensive consultants from another firm who came in and set up a number of goals and milestones. Within three months, a number of these goals had been achieved. The company decided to throw a party to celebrate. At the party, a number of people confronted our friend about his sullen demeanor. He told them that he didn't want to spoil the party, so he would answer their questions the following week. On Monday, he asked all the executives, by a show of hands, how many knew about the organization's challenges before the consultants showed up. Almost every hand went up. He expressed his fear that after the consultants left, the leaders still wouldn't have learned to identify their challenges and take the responsibility to fix the problems they knew existed.

The challenge with blame is that it doesn't solve the issues other than pushing the responsibility for its occurrence to someone else. Individuals, teams, and organizations need to confront and understand the nature of their challenges. Individuals must then step up, own the problems, and hold the conversations that lead to improved results.

THE "GOOD-FOR-EVERYONE-ELSE" GAME

This is a game often played by leaders to get what they want or avoid what they don't want. Examples of this game might be verbally framed as:

"I like giving feedback—not receiving it."

"I like change—changing others."

"I like collaborative decision making—as long as you do it my way."

"I like soliciting ideas—as long as you recognize I'm right."

This type of game is most prevalent when leaders talk the talk, but then don't walk the talk. They often use their position of leadership to exempt themselves for not practicing what they're preaching.

A good example was portrayed recently in Hollywood's most recent rendition of *Robin Hood,* starring Russell Crowe. A scene at the beginning of the film occurs the night before the English lay siege to a French chateau. Richard the Lionheart is extolling the virtues of his crusade, England, and his people. He expresses his desires to speak to an honest Englishman—a man who will always tell the truth. He then encounters Robin, who is fighting over his honesty in playing a game of chance with his friend, Little John. The king asks Robin if he is an honest man who can be counted on to tell the truth. Robin looks down and contemplates his answer. He tells the king that, yes, he is an honest man. King Richard then asks him, "Has there ever been a time when you questioned the sanctity of my crusade?" After quietly contemplating his answer, Robin says, "Yes sire, there was a time, when with swords drawn we were ordered to kill 2,000 women and children. One woman looked up into my eyes, not with hate or fear, but with pity." This scene ends, and the next scene is of Robin and his comrades in the stocks while the other soldiers lay siege to the chateau in the background. King Richard really didn't want honest feedback. He wanted validation—validation for his quest.

So it goes that when leaders ask others to step up, speak up, change and improve the organization, those who do find themselves in the stocks, figuratively. Individuals feel indirectly punished for taking initiative when nothing ever changes. People give their hearts and hands to a cause and then are disappointed by the lack of action or commitment by their leaders. Such

behavior on the part of leadership leads to cynicism, disbelief, mistrust, and hesitation to embrace other changes.

We believe that leaders' inaction or lack of commitment stems from a variety of reasons. Sometimes other issues or challenges at work take priority over what was pronounced "important." Sometimes leaders get into a change initiative only to find that the personal cost of change is greater than initially anticipated. This often happens with late career executives. Whatever the reason for not "walking the talk", there needs to be a deliberate and reasonable justification that will help others understand a lack of commitment, change in direction, or realigned priority. Rather than leaving others to attribute negative intent to shifts in focus, leaders need to go public in sharing what they are doing and why.

THE "DELUSION-COLLUSION" GAME

Everyone plays this game at some time or another. The Delusion-Collusion game is played by individuals and their peers, bosses, and direct reports who know the talk and the walk. Ironically, they think they are talking the talk and walking the talk, but they aren't. They are always well intended, but they just don't stop to think and challenge their own assumptions and actions. Consider the following example:

Lifting Accountability to a New Level

We had been working with the CEO of a large manufacturing company for over two years. Our objective was to create a more respectful and open culture by introducing the dialogue skills that would help people hold the difficult conversations that they were avoiding. It was 8:00 p.m. when the office phone started ringing. A number of managers from the main plant called us to tell us that the CEO had begun his weekly staff meeting that morning by stating that he wanted to increase their accountability to create the

desired results. After making this announcement, he continued by saying, "Dialogue aside…." Then he ripped into each manager one by one in front of the others, systematically berating and belittling them in the process. Furious, we called the CEO's office numerous times the next day only to be put off by his assistant.

As a last attempt to hold a difficult conversation, we wrote a letter of resignation on the basis that he had violated all the ground rules we had established and had severely damaged the culture of respect and candor we had worked so hard to establish. The next day we received an email inviting us to come to the plant discuss our letter.

When we arrived at the plant, we were escorted into the CEO's office by Security. The CEO was in the office with his Executive Vice President. The CEO arose and started ranting, "I couldn't believe it when I got your letter and that you would say the things to me you said!" Then he caught himself, fell back into his chair, and gestured toward the EVP. "I let Jim read your letter and asked him if he thought you were right. He said that he knew that you were. I am sorry that I violated our agreements. I just wanted everyone to know how serious I was about creating increased accountability!" he pleaded.

After establishing that he was still committed to our culture change objectives, we helped him explore what had happened in the meeting. "Was anyone participating or asking questions at the end of the meeting?" we asked. "No, in fact I was the only one talking, and they were all looking down at the floor." he replied. He seemed to come to a sense of his own lack of awareness. We helped him explore his own thinking and then asked him to validate the thinking of others. He began by interviewing one of his most trusted executives. She candidly told him that she was embarrassed and angry because

of his treatment of everyone. She told him that the meeting had ruined her whole day and that she had spent the entire evening wondering if she still wanted to work for the company.

Although this leader was well intended, he just didn't stop to think through the consequences of his actions. What is also noteworthy is that his direct reports let him get away with it after his initial outburst. If we hadn't given him feedback, he never would have known.

The Delusion-Collusion Game shows up as we observe people doing things that we don't like or that aren't in the organization's best interest, but then we choose to say nothing. By not saying anything, we are enabling their behavior, which means we will get more of the same.

We have to realize when we are potentially part of the problem! If others engage in behavior that stifles productivity and impacts profitability, we need to say something, or we are also at fault.

This game reminds us of a scene from the movie, *Big* starring Tom Hanks. You'll remember that Tom was granted a wish of becoming "big"—he wakes up one morning as an adult. He runs away from home and not long after, he begins working at a toy company and becomes part of the executive team that oversees toy design. He is sitting in a meeting playing with a robot that turns into a building. The VP of Marketing finishes giving a presentation forecasting how much money they will make by putting this toy into production, and everyone claps. Tom then raises his hand and says, "I don't get it!"

The CEO asks, "What don't you get?"

"Who wants to play with a robot that turns into a building? That's no fun! We should have a robot that turns into a bug or something. You know, maybe a prehistoric bug that smashes cars with its big pinchers!"

Immediately, everyone is energized and starts brainstorming all kinds of ideas to improve upon Tom's idea.

This isn't what usually happens. We usually don't break the unspoken protocol of just keeping our mouths shut. And yet, if we want to improve productivity and profitability, everyone should speak up, and we should all help to hold one another accountable. Indeed, you might ask yourself this question:

"How much money is being lost at my company by people for whom I am responsible?"

What Should You Do?

Everyone should be committed to improving productivity and profitability by improving their ability to do the following:

1. Discuss the Undiscussables

Learning how to share what is usually "undiscussable" is the key to improving results. Leaders, individuals, and teams who practice dialogue skills end up talking more about what *really* matters. They know how to share their perspectives and invite others to engage and contribute to the conversation. The synergy of collaboration helps to broaden individual perspective and results in improved problem-solving and decision-making. The solutions generated address the challenges that affect results.

We realize that sharing undiscussables is not easy, and that in sharing them we should avoid embarrassing or making people feel uncomfortable. However, we should not let this keep us from talking about the issues that will lead to change and improvement. Sharing undiscussables is walking a fine line—the line between talking about the issues and not making people feel so uncomfortable that they shut down. But if we want people to be more candid, we must learn to candidly share our own thinking in such a way that invites others to do the same

2. Own the Problem

The reason we engage in dialogue is to increase our understanding of the challenges we face. Learning from others helps us create accountability and responsibility for own our problems and to develop lasting solutions.

Blaming others for our problems continually shifts responsibility to others. We may get ourselves off the hook, but no one is left to own the problem and we are left riding the solutions "merry-go-round" to nowhere. Engaging in this behavior creates more frustration, finger pointing, and turf wars, all while delivering the same—or even diminished—results. People need to step up and own their problems.

3. Reward Openness By Celebrating Success

You have to find a way to reward openness and candor so people will feel safe to speak up and share their thinking.

We know of an organization that created a book of stories of improvement and the resources saved or created from implementing individuals' ideas. After individuals engaged in the dialogue training, they were asked to submit their stories of the improvements that were made or the results achieved. The book was often referred to as the "That-Will-Never-Work"

book. Copies of the books were left on the tables in the training center. Executives who visited the training center were often seen thumbing through the stories. When funding questions came up each year to justify the training center, the executives were always on board. They valued training that improved and increased results.

Why is this so important? You can tell when the culture of an organization changes by when the stories people tell change. Publishing improvements and recognizing people for their contributions are a way of facilitating change in the culture though the telling of stories and recognizing tangible results.

4. Take and Hold No Prisoners

Often when we give people feedback, we focus more on punishing the person's bad judgment, poor behavior, or wrong-doing than on improving the situation. We often punish people with questions like, "Why did you do that?" or "What on earth were you thinking?" These questions are veiled substitutions for telling people they are as dumb as a post. Why do that? People already know when they've performed poorly and feel bad enough as it is. Remember that "put-downs" lead to shut-down.

Rather than putting people in a protective-reactive mode of thinking, we should honestly explore the reasoning and rationale for their choice of action. Making conversations about learning and discovery completely changes the tenor of a conversation. Holding conversations that are based on these principles allows you to coach, teach, and mentor the individual for improved results. Doing so also says to the person, "I care about your growth and development."

After all, we all make mistakes. That's how we learn. The challenge is to not repeat the same mistakes.

5. Establish Agreements of Support

Take time to hold a conversation with those you work with and ask them if they would like to know when they are not meeting expectations. Every one of them will answer in the affirmative. This is about making an agreement **not** to enable poor behavior. You are making a commitment to help them improve and to achieve desired results. Everyone appreciates that kind of support.

Recently we were told of a senior sales executive who confronted the organization's Board of Directors. While screaming and yelling, she made a statement something like this, "All these requirements to create spreadsheets and analysis of expenditures are ridiculous! I know how to make money. I have a real feel for it. If you'll just let me loose, I'll make you more money than you can imagine! After all, I am the smartest person in the company. You know it. I know it. So just get off my back!" She stormed out of the room.

All the senior executives just looked at each other and said nothing. After what seemed like an eternity, one board member asked, "Well, do we have values here or not? Are we going to allow this type of behavior to continue or not?" Her speaking up got the ball rolling, and a productive conversation ensued.

IN SUMMARY

To improve productivity and profitability, individuals need to confront the way they are using an organization's resources. We all need to quit making negative judgments about others' behaviors and learn to surface, challenge, and explore our assumptions with those involved. We need to stop blaming others for our poor results and explore the reasons and actions behind the results as we own solving our problems. We need to understand how the lack of accountability by leadership does not justify broken promises, unmet commitments, and violated expectations.

And finally, we need to step up and provide the feedback that people need to improve and grow rather than taking the "politically prudent" approach that leads us to say nothing and thereby enable poor behavior and less-than-desirable results.

What's Next?

DOOR Training and Consulting is a global training provider, offering training, consulting, and coaching in over 55 countries. We perform training needs analysis, curriculum design and development, global training delivery, administration, a coaching academy, train the trainer sessions, and accelerating change implementation programs. We are proud to partner with DialogueWORKS..

DialogueWORKS has over 20 years experience teaching people the dialogue skills that help individuals improve their results and their culture. We have developed a number of training products that will help you and your organization learn to talk about what matters most – improving productivity and profitability. We help people make the "undiscussable" discussable, and teach people how to hold REAL conversations that increase respect, build relationships, and achieve results.

John R. Stoker is the founder of DialogueWORKS and author of the forthcoming book: Overcoming FakeTalk: Creating REAL Conversations for Results.