



Executive games

The fear of losing face in a boardroom meeting can often lead executives to stay quiet on issues when they should speak up. This can mean important issues are not being dealt with. **Paul Donovan** explores the telltale signs of executives avoiding issues and what HR can do stop it.

While things might look sophisticated in the boardroom of your company, it is possible that games are being played that might fit better at the schoolyard lunch table.

These games can be hard to pick among the suits and grown-up language. To add to the mix; they are being played without the group acknowledging to themselves that they are being played. So discussing the games is actually out of bounds.

The great problem with this scenario is that the games have many and far-reaching unwanted consequences for the group and the organisation that they lead.

What are these games?

Your senior executive group may be using certain phrases or approaches in their meetings to trigger a strategy that enables them to avoid threatening situations. While they may be effective at achieving that end, these strategies are also likely to be creating frustration or resentment in some of the group. I have listed three below. There are others.

“Let’s not have an argument now ...” Just when things start to get a bit heated someone with power in the room may say something like this. It may sound grown-up and very reasonable but statements such as this may represent nothing more than an unwillingness to have negative feelings in the boardroom. The expression of those negative feelings may appear as a threatening lack of control by whoever has power in the room. In an attempt to avoid the situation, the person with power may unilaterally shut down the conversation while appearing to serve the group.

“Silence is agreement ...” For some executive groups this particular example of “meeting ground rules” may seem an efficient way to move through an agenda, but in our experience it rarely leads to robust dialogue within executive groups. Rather, it becomes per-

mission for the group not to explore their own silence.

Gaps, pauses and hesitations are a rich source of information within a group about how the participants are processing the issues discussed. Within these brief silences can often lay the unspoken questions and challenges that the group requires to create in-depth investigation of some organisational issues. Therefore, rather than interpreting silence as the signal to move on, it may be an important trigger to slow down the meeting and provide the group with a little more space to voice the thoughts that are more difficult to say.

“This is too tactical for us, we should move on ...” It sounds very “executive” indeed, but sometimes the intention to stay strategic can camouflage the fear of getting down to brass tacks. If getting real data into the conversation is going to be threatening for one or more members, then it is likely that the whole group will support a strategy to stay general in the meeting.

Here are some examples. Exactly how many times has the service group complained about how the salespeople talk to them? What specific part of the email sent out by the Financial Controller created frustration in the sales teams? Specifically which sales teams have brought the average growth rate down and what can we learn from that?

Sometimes questions such as these can threaten the group and, if so, the group may unconsciously agree to avoid the discomfort.

Why are these games played?

First, our research suggests these games are played largely because they are effective in enabling the group to avoid the experience of feeling threatened, embarrassed or of some member losing face. Generally speaking, these feelings are a “no go” zone for executives and they are definitely not ones to let your team members know you are having.

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As a consequence, rather than endure the discomfort of having those feelings, the group engages in strategies to avoid them altogether.

Fundamentally then, the games are played because of a lack of emotional intelligence. The inability of the group to become aware of their feelings and manage them without enacting a reactionary strategy is at the essence of this issue and at the heart of emotional intelligence.

What are the unwanted consequences of the games?

Senior executive teams who do not focus on and explore the dynamic that is shaping their interactions risk organisational-wide implications. In the first place, some of the executives themselves are likely to harbour negative feelings about their experience with

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Putting your best linguistic foot forward

Language templates to skilfully advocate a point of view;

1. Make your thinking more visible, eg

- "Here's what I think, and here's how I got there"
- "I assumed that ... and I came this conclusion because ..."
- "I noticed that ... and it led me to conclude ..."

2. Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions:

- "What do you think about what I have said?"
- "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning? Can you add anything?"
- "One aspect of my reasoning which I am a little unsure about is ..."
- "Do you see this differently?"

Language templates to skilfully inquire about another's point of view;

1. Ask other to make their thinking process visible, eg

- "What leads you to conclude that?"
- "What data do you have for that? What causes you to say that?"
- "Can you help me understand your thinking here?"
- "I'd like to ask you about your assumptions here because ..."

2. Compare your assumptions to theirs, eg

- "Am I correct in saying that your assumption is ...?"
- "My assumption is that ... and while I can't be sure, it would seem that your assumption is that ..."

some executives will be acting in a contrary way. This breeds organisational cynicism and, ultimately, malaise.

What can HR do about it?

As an HR professional it may feel threatening to broach this issue with your senior team. This is understandable and it does not mean that you are out of your depth in raising the issue.

Before raising it, I would recommend that HR spend a little time doing the very thing your senior team will ultimately need to learn how to do. That is, allow yourself to have the uncomfortable feeling and briefly explore some of your personal concerns relating to raising this issue.

Following this, you may choose to raise the topic of senior executive meetings with the MD or CEO (or whoever is the head of the senior team). Your first sentence may sound something like this:

"While I can't be entirely sure, I suspect the team may be avoiding discussing some issues and that this avoidance is having implications on the team (and organisational) performance and culture.

Would you be willing to talk about this with me now?"

Then, with the CEO's permission, it may be helpful to provide the whole senior team with some language tools that will enable the group to raise issues that have previously remained underground.

These tools will enable the team members to raise issues while minimising the threat the issue may represent. I recommend a series of language templates to kick-start a more effective way of discussing issues within the group. These templates are based on the "ladder of inference" model developed by Chris Argyris. (See box above)

Finally, seek to gain the group's agreement to instigate a process of reflection at the end of each important senior group meeting. In this reflective time, the group could talk to the following simple (but brave) questions;

- What parts of the meeting (if any) created any peaks of feeling? Those feelings may be positive or negative.
- In association with those feelings, what did you think or feel that you did not say?
- What did you think might happen if you did say it?

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Paul Donovan is the Director of Paul Donovan Consulting which is a consultancy which specialises in building the capacity of businesses to engage in dialogue that delivers their desired outcomes. www.pdconsult.com.au.